

one reason

The Eternal Challenge

A Journey Through
The Miraculous
Qur'an

Abu Zakariya

**To my beloved children: Zakariya, Eesa and Maryam;
May Allah make you follow in the footsteps of the Prophets,
peace be upon them, and may you each embody the
Qur'an. Ameen.**

ISBN 978-1-910952-00-9

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
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Published & distributed by



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Preface

The last century has witnessed a surge in literature about the Qur'an in many languages, written by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. More often than not, such works focus on a single topic or are directed at a scholarly audience. So, I decided to write this book because there was a need for a comprehensive and up-to-date work about the Qur'an for people of all faiths and none. I have avoided an academic style in order to make the book accessible to everyone. No prior knowledge of the Qur'an or Islam is needed to read this book.

I want to give readers an insight into why the Qur'an has captivated the hearts and minds of over 1.5 billion Muslims around the world, including my own. Please note that it is not possible for one book to cover every nuance of the Qur'an, nor is it possible to address every contention. Such a scope would require volumes. I therefore encourage readers to reflect on the points this book raises and also undertake their own further research. My sincere hope is that this book will serve as a valuable companion for those setting out on the stimulating journey to discover the message of the Qur'an, a message that extends to everyone who is prepared to listen to what it has to say.

We value any feedback that you might have; as such, we have set up an online resource to provide updates to the book and also address any questions we receive from readers (<http://www.OneReason.org/eternalchallenge>). Also, as this is the first book of its kind, there is a possibility of errors. If readers do happen to come across any errors, then we kindly request that you please notify us (EternalChallenge@OneReason.org) so that they can be corrected in a future edition.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who helped me along my journey of writing this book, which represents the culmination of decades of collective research. This book would simply not have been possible without the support of my family and the hard work of my peers who are too numerous to mention by name. I am especially grateful to Hamza Tzortzis and Subboor Ahmad for entrusting me with writing a book of this importance. Their contributions and encouragement have been invaluable. Most importantly, I am grateful to Allah for His help, without which nothing could have been done. I humbly pray to Him to accept this work as a service unto Him, and to forgive me for any unintentional mistakes.

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ManyProphetsOneMessage.com



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What is the Qur'an?

What is the Qur'an, and how did it come about? Muslims believe that the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, by God Almighty through the Angel Gabriel. The Qur'an informs us that Muhammad is the final Messenger in a long line of Messengers that God sent before him, such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus, peace be upon them all. This is one of the many unique aspects of the Qur'an: it acknowledges all of the Messengers sent by God.

The Qur'an's impact on the world is immeasurable. Although the Qur'an was revealed in 7th century Arabia, it contains a universal message for the whole of mankind. Because of the Qur'an, there are over 1.5 billion Muslims in the world today - nearly a quarter of humanity. They are people of all races, nationalities and backgrounds. Just to give you a practical demonstration of how many Muslims there are in the world, at any given moment, on any day, someone, somewhere, is reciting the Qur'an. It is estimated that there are many millions of Muslims alive today who have memorised the entire Qur'an. One has to wonder, what is it about the Qur'an that has made such an imprint on the hearts of over a billion Muslims?

While the Qur'an is the most widely read book in the world, it is also arguably the most often misunderstood and misrepresented. These days it seems that everyone is talking about the Qur'an. But how many have actually read it? How many have allowed it to speak for

itself? Whether you have read the Qur'an or not, whether you have even heard of the Qur'an before or not, it has already shaped and influenced your life in ways you cannot imagine.

You may be thinking to yourself, do all religions not make fantastical claims? After all, if these ancient books were originally written in the past, and we were not there at the time to witness the events, then does not belief in them ultimately derive from blind faith? Muslims do not just believe that the Qur'an is from God based on blind faith. The Qur'an is a living miracle, one that we can all experience for ourselves. Bold claims need to be backed up by strong evidence. As you are going to see, the Qur'an challenges its reader and engages our intellect by providing many testable and verifiable proofs of its divine origin.

This book is going to challenge misconceptions and make some strong assertions. If you are a sceptic of religious books because you think that they are filled with too many fantastical claims and insufficient evidence, then prepare to be surprised. If you have already read the Qur'an and think that you have seen everything it has to offer, think again!



What does it teach?

There is a profound question that each and every one of us reflects on at some point during our lives:

“Why am I here? What is my purpose?”

When we reflect upon our own existence, we will come to the realisation that, at some point in time, we began to exist. Since we once did not exist and now we do, it follows that we must have had a beginning. In the light of this, the Qur'an puts forward a simple-but-powerful argument with regard to our origins:

“Or were they created by nothing? Or were they the creators (of themselves)? Or did they create the heavens and earth? Rather, they are not certain.” [52:35-36]

The Qur'an engages its audience by inviting us to ponder upon some rational, logical questions which we can use to arrive at a conclusion, not only about our origin, but also about the origin of everything that exists in the material world: in other words, the entire universe. There is an abundance of cosmological evidence that the universe had a beginning. This is the most predominant view among cosmologists. If we take these questions that the Qur'an poses and apply them to the universe, then there are three possibilities for its origin:

- 1. It was created from nothing***
- 2. It was self-created***
- 3. It has an external cause***

The first possibility is that the universe was created from nothing. Can something really come from nothing? This is impossible. We know from our own personal experience of life, as well as the laws of the universe, that things do not just pop into existence out of nothing. Out of nothing, nothing comes!

This leads us to the next possibility: the universe was self-created. Can something create itself? This is a self-contradiction. Something creating itself requires its own pre-existence. Things cannot exist and not exist at the same time. That would be like saying that your mother gave birth to herself!

Since something cannot come from nothing, and self-creation is absurd, then what is the alternative? There is one final possibility: the universe has an external cause. This is the best explanation for the origin of the universe and everything in it, including ourselves, because it is intuitive and concurs with natural law: whatever begins to exist has a cause. One has to wonder, is the creative force behind the universe some random event or an intelligent mind? Universal human experience tells us that when we find things working according to systems and laws, something intelligent has made those systems and laws.

Let us take an example of something most of us have and use on a regular basis: the mobile phone. Mobile phones are composed of a few basic elements, such as plastic, glass, silicon and some precious metals. Plastic comes from oil; glass and silicon come from sand. So basically, what you are holding in your hand is oil and sand. Now, imagine if you were walking along in the desert, rich in oil and sand, and you picked up a mobile phone which you just found lying there. Would the thought ever enter your mind that this is a product of millions of years of random events? The wind blew, the sun shone, the rain fell, lightning struck, the oil bubbled, the camel trod and after millions and millions of years the mobile phone formed itself.

In reality, is there a chance that this could have randomly formed itself through natural processes? However remotely possible, most of us would simply not accept this as a reasonable explanation.

Why, then, would we accept such an explanation for our universe, which is significantly more complex than a mobile phone? When we observe the planets, solar systems, galaxies, stars and everything else in the universe, we see that they are all highly ordered, with intricate systems and laws in place.

A good example is the incredible fine-tuning of the universe. Evidence shows that the constants of physics have been finely tuned to a degree impossible for human engineering to achieve, never mind a random event. One such example is the Cosmological Constant. The Nobel Prize winner and Professor of Physics, Steven Weinberg, made the following calculation with regard to the Cosmological Constant:

“One constant does seem to require an incredible fine-tuning. The existence of life of any kind seems to require a cancellation between different contributions to the vacuum energy, accurate to about 120 decimal places.” If not: “the universe either would go through a complete cycle of expansion and contraction before life could arise, or would expand so rapidly that no galaxies or stars could form.” [1]

To put it another way, if this constant differed by one part in

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then there would have been no chance for life in the universe. This degree of fine-tuning is difficult to imagine because such accuracy represents an incredibly sensitive balance. The following analogy should make it easier to visualise: imagine if every grain of sand on

earth, from every beach and desert that exists, was collected together and placed in a gigantic container. Now take just one of these grains, paint it red and mix it back with the rest of the sand. Blindfold a friend and ask them to pick out the red grain. What are the odds that they will be successful? Yet you would have to believe in such a feat, to believe that the fine-tuning of the universe came about by chance.

The Cosmological Constant is just one example. There are many others, including the ratio of electrons and protons, the ratio of electromagnetic force and gravity, and the mass density of the universe. These have similar degrees of fine-tuning. Together, they form a delicately balanced system, virtually nothing of which can be altered without either preventing the universe from existing or making it unsuitable for any form of life to exist. This would be similar to painting one of those grains of sand blue, one green and one yellow and picking them out in that order after the red grain! Is it not much more reasonable to conclude that the universe and life are a result of wilful intelligent design? Such fine-tuning throughout the laws of physics demonstrates the wisdom and power of the creator of the universe. As the Qur'an tells us, "**He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth, and when He decrees something, He says only, 'Be,' and it is.**" [2:117]

Now, having a creator is one thing, but how do we know we have a purpose? Everything in this universe has a purpose. Even simple things like a chair, a bowl and even the book you are holding in your hands serve a purpose. Would it not be sad if we did not have a purpose? If we reflect and look at the world around us, we can easily come to the conclusion that we must have a purpose. Think about the vastness of our universe with all its billions of galaxies and trillions of planets. The Qur'an tells us that God did not create all this for no reason: "**We did not create the heavens and the earth and everything between them playfully.**" [21:16]

The sun gives us warmth; the clouds give us rain; the trees and animals give us food. Since a lot of the systems that God has put in place in our universe are to ensure our survival and well-being, then

God must have a purpose in mind for us too.

This is what the Qur'an tells us:

It is God who created the heavens and earth, who has sent down water from the sky and with it brought forth produce to nourish you; He has made ships useful to you, sailing the sea by His command, and the rivers too; He has made the sun and the moon useful to you, steady on their paths; He has made the night and day useful to you and given you some of everything you asked Him for. If you tried to count God's favours you could never calculate them. [14:32–34]

So that nagging question comes up again, what is our purpose? Again, the Qur'an has the answer: "**I created jinn [spirits] and mankind only to worship Me.**" [51:56]

Now, what do you understand about 'worship'? Most will say prayer. This is correct; however, in the Qur'an, worship is much more comprehensive than just praying. It includes all acts of obedience that are pleasing to our Creator. Even exercise and eating can be acts of worship if our intention is to stay healthy and strong!

Why perform worship? It is important to understand that our Creator does not need our worship. In fact, the Qur'an tells us that it is human beings who have a need to worship. We are more than just flesh and bone, we have a spiritual side that also needs nourishing. Many people are wealthy - materially speaking - but are unhappy with their lives because they neglect their spiritual well-being. In order for us to experience true peace, both our bodies and soul need to be in tune with our Creator: "**Truly it is in the remembrance of God that hearts find peace.**" [13:28] By endeavouring to make every aspect of our lives pleasing to our Creator, we will be in a state of constant remembrance of God and our hearts will be at peace. This is a revolutionary way of thinking but practically, if

someone were to do this, a lot of their actions would not change. Crucially, however, the thought process behind their actions would, and they would find the inner peace so needed in today's society!

So, a question rises - what is the best way to worship God? To help us consider this, let us again return to the example of mobile phones. Mobile phones are obviously not as sophisticated as human beings, but we share many things in common. We both have a lifespan, we both require energy to function correctly, and we both can be damaged if we are not properly taken care of. When mobile phones develop a problem, the first thing most people do is to refer to the instruction manual for the mobile phone. Why? Because it has been made to show us the best way of using it and we rightly listen to the experts! The creator of the phone knows the best way to use that phone and they have imparted their knowledge to us in the form of instruction manuals. Similarly, then, the Qur'an is like an instruction manual for humanity as it came from the one who made us, God, our Creator, and He knows us better than we know ourselves. This is why His knowledge and His guidance for how we should live will always surpass any invented human philosophies and ways of life.

Why would an All-Powerful, All-Wise Being send us guidance? Why not just create us and leave us to our own devices? The Qur'an tells us that as well as having attributes of Power and Wisdom, our Creator is also the Most Forgiving and Most Loving: "***It is He who brings people to life, and will restore them to life again – and He is the Most Forgiving, the Most Loving.***" [85:13-14] Our Creator cares about us and it is out of His mercy that He sent mankind the Qur'an.



What are its main themes?

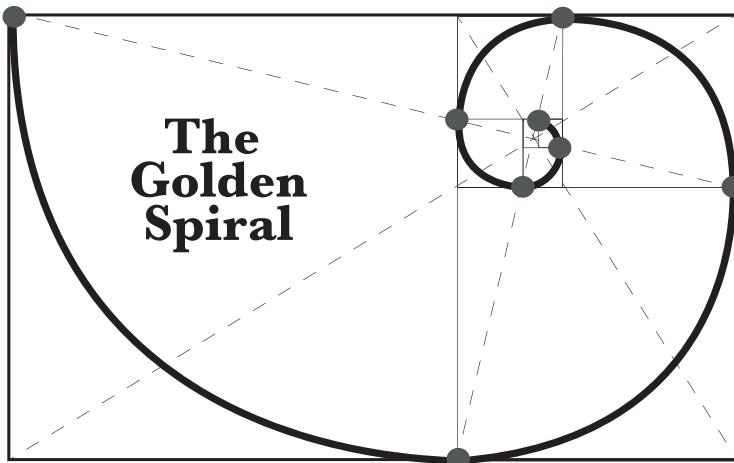
Belief in God Almighty

The essence of the Qur'an, monotheism, is captured in its 112th chapter:

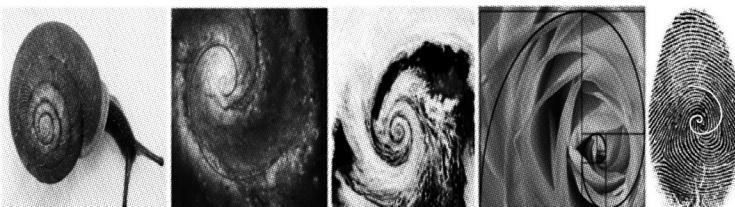
*Say, ‘He is God the One,
God the eternal.
He begot no one nor was He begotten.
No one is comparable to Him.’ [Chapter 112]*

You can think of this chapter of the Qur'an as the manifesto of monotheism in Islam. It tells us that God is One. This is not one in the sense of one which can become two and two which can become three and so on. This is One and uniquely One, that cannot become two. But how can we know that our Creator is One? Why can there not be two or three? We can come to this conclusion through reason, a gift given to us by God, which allows us to ponder and reflect on the universe around us and make conclusions about it. It is like when an art historian looks at a series of paintings without knowing the name of the painter, but can identify the artist who created them based on the signature style of the painting.

So when it comes to our divine origins, what can we conclude based on the universe around us? It turns out that there is consistent design throughout nature; there are many repeating numbers such as the Fibonacci Sequence. This mathematical series of numbers has been described as “Nature’s Code”. Fibonacci numbers recur over and over in many unrelated phenomena in nature. These numbers can be seen from the smallest of things to the largest, from biological systems to inanimate objects. A swirling pattern, known as the Golden Spiral, is one example of a shape based on these numbers:



Examples in nature that exhibit this pattern include a snail's shell, the shape of galaxies, the swirling formation of hurricanes, flowers and even our fingerprints:



You can think of these patterns as a consistent design signature. This consistent design signature in nature shows the Oneness of the Creator who made it all.

Another example of consistent design throughout nature is DNA. DNA is genetic information which all living creatures carry in each of their cells. All genes, in every living creature, are coded messages for how to build the organism. You can think of them as blueprints. Even though living things may outwardly appear to be very different, at the genetic level, because of their shared creator, they can be very similar. For example, as humans we share approximately 50 percent of our DNA with banana trees. We find that the DNA, the blueprint, is shared by all living things across nature. This common design points to a common designer - One Creator behind it all.

What would be the case if there were multiple gods, multiple creators? Polytheistic religions, religions that believe in multiple gods, always portray these gods with distinct personalities. This is why the religions are filled with tales of disputes among the gods as their personalities clash. A good example is Hinduism, where the god Shiva is said to have cut the head off the god Ganesh and later replaced his head with an elephant's.

If there were multiple gods, multiple creators, then this would be reflected in the reality of the world around us. The state of creation would likely be chaotic and the blueprints across nature would surely differ: each god, with its own distinct personality, would impose its own design on its own creations. If there were various gods who made the different things we see today, it would be reasonable to assume that even those things which look the same are very different at a microscopic level. Therefore, evidence in nature points us to the conclusion that there must instead be One Creator.

A critic may point out that things that are engineered are generally made by more than one creator, for example, cars. When it comes to the creation of cars, one person designs the engine, another person designs the braking system and so on and so forth. Is this a

valid argument? There may be a possibility of multiple designers or creators collaborating with one another in the human domain, as illustrated by the car example, but there cannot be more than one God in the domain of the divine. This is because when we think of God, we think of a divine being with a will - God does whatever He wills. In other words, God, by definition, is a being that has an unlimited imposing will. For the sake of argument, what would be the situation if there were two Gods and a conflict arose between them? Let us imagine that they each wanted to move a rock in opposite directions. Since both their wills cannot be enforced, there are only two possibilities:

1. They agree to compromise and have the same will: this would mean that both their wills are now limited and passive, which would mean they are not Gods anymore by definition!
2. One overpowers the other: it is this dominant God that is the true God.

As you can see in this example, it is impossible to have multiple wills. The will of any God which is not realised cannot be considered God. This is the simplest and most logical explanation for the order and stability of the universe around us: there is only one unlimited imposing will, one God, and He alone deserves our worship.

Getting back to the chapter of the Qur'an, in the next verse, we are also told that God is eternal: "**God the eternal...**" This means that He has no beginning and will never come to an end. A common question many people ask is "who created God?" If we use reason, we come to the conclusion that God must be uncreated due to the absurdity of a never ending chain of creators. To illustrate this better, if the creator of the universe had a creator, and that creator had a creator, and that creator had a creator, and so on and so forth, then we would not have a universe. Imagine if you were told that you could not read this book until someone else read it before you, and that person also could not read it until someone else read

it before them, and this went on forever. Would anyone ever read this book? The answer is no. Now if we apply this principle to the universe, then we would have to conclude that the creator behind it is uncreated out of rational necessity, because for the universe to be in existence, we could not have an infinite number of creators. We rather need one eternal creator.

The next verse tells us that God does not have any children or parents: “***He begot no one nor was He begotten...***” Why would a supreme God not have any children or parents? The final verse of the chapter answers this question, “***No one is comparable to Him***”. Everything within the creation has to reproduce in order for life to continue. In other words, we have offspring out of a need for survival. Some people have children for other reasons, such as wanting to be looked after when they become old and frail. This is also a need. But if God is unlike His creation, then He does not have any needs, and so He does not beget.

Another point worth mentioning is the notion of the Creator being distinct from the creation. For example, if a person were to create a chair or a table, then that person would not become the chair or table. We are distinct and disjoined from what we make. Similarly, God created the universe and therefore the universe is distinct and disjoined from Him.

An interesting point is that the Qur'an says that belief in a Creator is the natural state of all human beings: “***So [Prophet], as a man of pure faith, stand firm and true in your devotion to the religion. This is the natural disposition God instilled in mankind...***” [30:30]

There is in fact, psychological, sociological and anthropological evidence to support this notion. Oxford University psychologist Dr Olivera Petrovich, an expert in psychology of religion, conducted some studies concerning the psychology of the human being and God's existence. She discovered that infants are hard-wired to believe in God, and atheism has to be learned [2].

Professor Justin Barrett did some research by looking at the behaviour and claims of children. He concluded that the children believed in what he calls “natural religion”. This is the idea that there is a personal being that created the entire universe. That ‘being’ cannot be human – it must be divine, supernatural:

Scientific research on children's developing minds and supernatural beliefs suggests that children normally and rapidly acquire minds that facilitate belief in supernatural agents... Not long after their first birthday, babies appear to understand that agents, but not natural forces or ordinary objects, can create order out of disorder... Who is the Creator? Children know people are not good candidates. It must have been a god... children are born believers of what I call natural religion... [3]

Let us consider the atheism of Communist Russia and Communist China. The Soviet Union was the first state to have an ideological objective to eliminate religion and replace it with atheism. The vast majority of people in the Russian empire were, at the time of the Communist revolution, religious believers, whereas the Communists aimed to break the power of all religious institutions and eventually replace religious belief with atheism. To that end, the Communist regime confiscated church property, ridiculed religion, harassed believers and propagated atheism in the schools. Criticism of atheism was strictly forbidden and sometimes led to imprisonment. In spite of this, atheists still had signs of what you would call a worship instinct, which relates to the natural state that the Qur'an speaks of. For example, their big statues of Stalin and Lenin were almost revered. When you look at different cultures, you can see this worship instinct coming through. This instinct even manifests itself in atheist cultures.

The fall of Communism saw a rapid revival of religion which is flourishing today in Russia. If belief in God is nothing more than

an ideology, something that people are indoctrinated with by their parents, then should these efforts by the Communist Party over the space of several generations not have undone religious convictions?

All this evidence leads to one conclusion: belief in God is not taught, but exists naturally within human beings. Therefore, when pondering God, the question should not actually be “does God exist?”, but rather “what reasons do we have to reject His existence?” because God’s existence is self-evidently true [4].



Stories of the Prophets and past nations

The Qur'an informs us that every nation on earth has, at some point in its history, been sent a messenger by God: "**We sent a messenger to every community, saying, 'Worship God and shun false gods.'**" [16:36] This shows us that messengers play an important role in revelation. Every messenger sent by God to mankind, from the very first Prophet, Adam, all the way to the final Prophet, Muhammad, came with the same core message of monotheism: worship the one true God, our Creator, and not false gods.

Many are not aware that Muslims revere individuals such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus as great prophets of God. The Qur'an acknowledges their high status among mankind and commands Muslims to hold all of them in equally high regard:

So [you believers], say, 'We believe in God and in what was sent down to us and what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and what was given to Moses, Jesus, and all the Prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we devote ourselves to Him.' [2:136]

This commonality between the Qur'an and other scriptures is a strong indication that the God who inspired the Prophet Muhammad is the same God that inspired Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Although these individuals represented the best of mankind in terms of their honesty, truthfulness and integrity, the Qur'an teaches that they are still human beings who did not share in any of the attributes of God.

One of the most important individuals mentioned in the Qur'an is Jesus. In fact, Islam holds a unique position among world religions as it is the only religion other than Christianity that acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah. Whilst there are many similarities between Islam and Christianity when it comes to Jesus, the main area where the Qur'an differs is the nature of Jesus. The Qur'an clarifies for mankind that Jesus was not divine but rather a human messenger sent by God:

The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a messenger; other messengers had come and gone before him; his mother was a virtuous woman; both ate food [like other mortals]. See how clear We make these signs for them... [5:75]

This verse illustrates one of the many beautiful qualities of the Qur'an: its simplicity. The Qur'an contains a universal message for people of all ages and backgrounds, from the child to the adult, from lay people to scholars. The example presented by the Qur'an here, the need of sustenance by Jesus, is in fact, profound if we reflect upon it. Anything that has a need, in this case food, cannot be God. What happens if the need is unfulfilled? In this case, Jesus would die from hunger. But we know that God is All Powerful; He cannot die.

Yet why did God choose to send messengers at all? Why not just drop Scripture from the sky? Messengers play the crucial role of teachers. Having revelation, or knowledge, is one thing. We also need a teacher to provide its correct interpretation, explanation and example in order for mankind to make use of the knowledge and implement it properly. Imagine going to a school that is without teachers, with the children just being handed the text books on complex subjects such

as algebra. Aside from the school being a very rowdy environment, many of us would struggle to understand the information contained in the books.

Along with the stories of the Prophets, the Qur'an is filled with stories of past nations who followed God, and those who refused to follow God's messengers and rebelled against God. Stories are an amazing means of capturing our attention and imparting wisdom and morals when we reflect on them: "***There is a lesson in the stories of such people for those who understand...***" [12:111] These stories are not in the Qur'an for the purpose of entertainment but rather to serve as an example to us so that we can avoid the mistakes of past nations in history.

The Qur'an tells us that the Prophet Muhammad is the last and final messenger: "***Muhammad is not the father of any one of you men; he is God's Messenger and the seal of the Prophets...***" [33:40] If God had sent many messengers before Muhammad, then why would He stop at Muhammad? Why would God not continue to send more messengers in the future? Every messenger prior to Muhammad was sent to his own people and not the whole of humanity. The Prophet Muhammad is the only messenger who was sent to the whole of mankind: "***We have sent you [Prophet] only to bring good news and warning to all people...***" [34:28]

Moreover, the message of Muhammad - the Qur'an - represents perfection in the way of life for human beings to live, as God says: "***Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed My blessing upon you, and chosen as your religion Islam...***" [5:3] If something has been perfected, it cannot be further improved. There is no need to send any additional messengers or messages to mankind.



The Hereafter

The Qur'an informs us that there is an existence beyond our worldly lives here on earth. Every one of us is going to die and return to God: "**Every soul is certain to taste death: We test you all through the bad and the good, and to Us you will all return.**" [21:35] So what is the purpose of this temporary existence here on earth, why did God not just create us in the eternal Hereafter? We are told that we are being tested whilst we are here on earth:

We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives, and crops. But [Prophet], give good news to those who are steadfast, those who say, when afflicted with a calamity, 'We belong to God and to Him we shall return.' [2:155-156]

From a human point of view, tests are usually performed because the one doing the testing is trying to discover something about the one being tested. However, God is not like man; God's knowledge is unlimited. God knows our innermost thoughts; indeed, He knows us better than we know ourselves: "**We created man - We know what his soul whispers to him: We are closer to him than his jugular vein**" [50:16]

Therefore, much like the earlier question of "why were we created to worship God", it is more about us than it is about God. There are a number of reasons why God tests us and why he allows hardship and adversity to befall us. It is all in accordance with God's wisdom and planning:

- To expose those who are true believers and those who are false: “***Do people think they will be left alone after saying ‘We believe’ without being put to the test? We tested those who went before them: God will certainly mark out which ones are truthful and which are lying.***” [29:2-3]

- Adversity and hardship also serve as reminders for people who become too absorbed in the worldly life and tend to take things for granted. Given that you are holding this book in your hands, you have been blessed with the ability to read. Adversity and hardship remind us to be grateful for all of God’s blessings: “***Whenever We are gracious to man, he goes away haughtily, but, as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer.***” [41:51]

- Because man is generally impatient and short sighted, we may see a test in a negative light when in actual fact it is good for us: “***You may dislike something although it is good for you, or like something although it is bad for you: God knows and you do not.***” [2:216]

- Finally, it must be noted that not all adversity and hardship is from God. Some of the trials we experience are a direct result of our own actions. For example, if someone drinks a lot of alcohol one night, they would expect to have a hangover in the morning: “***Whatever misfortune befalls you [people], it is because of what your own hands have done— God forgives much—***” [42:30]

As you can see, the tests of this world are primarily for the spiritual growth of human beings. Just as an intense fire separates pure gold from the rough ore to which it is bound in nature, tests purify our souls if we are sincere.

You might be wondering, what happens at the end of this test? What happens when our lives come to an end? Much like when we sit exams at school, our performance is evaluated and we are presented with the results. In the Qur'an, this is referred to as the Day of Judgement. This is a momentous event in the future when the whole of mankind will be resurrected from the dead:

[Prophet], say, 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die, and then He gathers you all to the Day of Resurrection of which there is no doubt, though most people do not comprehend.'
[45:26]

Only God knows the time of this event: **People ask you about the Hour. Say, 'God alone has knowledge of it.' How could you [Prophet] know? The Hour may well be near.** [33:63]

Every action that we perform during our lives is being recorded and we will have to answer for everything we have said and done:

On that Day, people will come forward in separate groups to be shown their deeds: whoever has done an atom's weight of good will see it, but whoever has done an atom's weight of evil will see that. [99:6-8]

In human courts, some wealthy people try to avoid justice by bribing the judge or the police. Or perhaps they are able to hire a skilled attorney who can get them off the hook. However, on the Day of Judgement there will simply be no escaping God's justice: **"...those who disbelieve and die disbelievers will not be saved even if they offer enough gold to fill the entire earth..."** [3:91]

Perhaps you are wondering if ultimately we are destined for the Hereafter, then what is the point of this life? Why not just skip this life and take us straight to the Day of Judgement? Let us think about an example in our world. Can you imagine if you went to sleep and woke up to find yourself in a courtroom accused of a crime you have

no memory of committing? We would surely all protest at this and defend ourselves by saying we are innocent of such crimes. By living and experiencing our earthly lives here, when it comes to the Day of Judgement, we will recall all the deeds that we have to answer for and will have no excuse before God. We will feel no sense of injustice because God sent His messengers to us and we were given the Qur'an as guidance. We will have no one to blame on that day except for ourselves.

The Day of Judgement is just a means; it is not an end. Like with any trial, there is an outcome: judgement will be passed on us by God. Those who believed in God and submitted to Him by following His guidance will be rewarded with eternal bliss in Paradise: “...**while those who believe and do good deeds will be the inhabitants of the Garden, there to remain.**” [2:82] For those who chose to reject God and His guidance, there is a terrible punishment in store: “**And for those who disbelieved in their Lord is the punishment of Hell, and wretched is the destination.**” [67:6]

We have a choice: to embrace God's eternal unbounded mercy, or to run away from it. Accepting His mercy, by responding to His message, and obeying, worshipping and loving Him, will facilitate our eternal happiness in Paradise. Rejecting and running away from God's mercy will ultimately lead to spending eternity in a place devoid of His love, a place of unhappiness – Hell. Remember, we have a choice. We decide to embrace His mercy or to escape. We have the free will to choose. The choices we make in this life will shape our fates in the eternal Hereafter.

You might find all this talk of tests, the Day of Judgement, and Paradise and Hell overwhelming. But what we must all remember is that God is the Most Compassionate and Most Merciful. He has made it easy for us to be successful in the Hereafter, if we really want to. How can this be the case? First, God has given us a consciousness, like an internal radar, which helps us distinguish right from wrong, in order to help us steer our lives towards good: “...**by the soul and how He formed it and inspired it [to know] its own rebellion and piety!**” [91:7-8]

When God puts our moral compass to the test, He tailors the tests to each of us as individuals, taking into account our strengths and weaknesses: “**God does not burden any soul with more than it can bear...**” [2:286] God is perfect and free of error; however, He knows we are not. Therefore, when we fall short and make mistakes, He forgives us if we repent: “**My servants who have harmed yourselves by your own excess, do not despair of God’s mercy. God forgives all sins: He is truly the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful.**” [39:53] When we do good deeds, they are much heavier on the scales compared to evil deeds: “**Whoever has done a good deed will have it ten times to his credit, but whoever has done a bad deed will be repaid only with its equivalent– they will not be wronged.**” [6:160] Finally, God has even sent us the detailed answers for how to pass the tests in the form of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad: “**The Messenger of God is an excellent model for those of you who put your hope in God and the Last Day and remember Him often.**” [33:21]

Let us combine all of these points and make an analogy with an exam that we might sit in this life. Have a think back to the last time you sat an exam. It could be a school exam, or even a driving test. Now, imagine if the examiner responsible for marking your examination made the following provisions for you, in order to help you pass the exam:

- You have a lifetime to pass the exam.
- The exam has been tailored to you as an individual by considering your strengths and weaknesses.
- During the exam, if you make mistakes, you are given the opportunity to correct those mistakes.
- Any correct answers you give are worth ten points. Only one point is deducted for a wrong answer.

- The examiner has sent you the answers to the questions before you even take the exam.
- The examiner has provided you with an expert to tutor you on how to successfully pass the exam.

With all these provisions in mind, if we are honest with ourselves, if any one of us were to fail an exam in such circumstances, would we really have anybody to blame but ourselves? God wants us to enter Paradise. He has made it easy to do so. It is up to us to follow His guidance.

Many of us go through life never contemplating topics like the Day of Judgement; we are content just living our lives in the pursuit of happiness. Most of us just want to be happy – even when sometimes we cannot pinpoint exactly what that ‘happiness’ is. We want to be content, live in ease, enjoy the company of our friends and family, and not be bogged down with the stresses and strains of daily living. This is why if you were to ask the average person why they want to get a good job, they would probably reply, ‘to earn enough to live comfortably’. If you questioned them further and asked why they want to live comfortably, they would say – just like the rest of us – ‘because I want to be happy’. Happiness is an end, not a means. It is the final destination, not the journey. We all want to be happy, and we seek ways to ensure that we achieve a happy state.

What makes people happy varies from one person to the next: some work hard for years to add degrees and career credentials to their names; some work night and day to achieve that perfect figure; some want the comforting love of a spouse or the bustle of a family; the list is endless. Whether it is through money, status or through the love of others – everybody is involved in trying to ‘get happy’, live happily, and eventually just be happy. This begs the question: what is true happiness?

To answer these questions, consider the following. Imagine that, while reading this, you have been sedated against your will. Suddenly,

you wake up and find yourself on a plane. You are in first class. You have your own cabin. The food is amazing. Your flatbed seat is designed for a luxurious comfortable experience. The entertainment is limitless. The service is out of this world. You start to enjoy all of the facilities. Think for a moment, and ask yourself this question: am I happy?

How can you be? You need some questions answered first. How did you even get on the plane? Where is it headed to? If these questions remain unanswered, how can you ever be happy? Even if you started to enjoy all of the luxuries at your disposal, you would never achieve true happiness. Would that frothy Belgian chocolate mousse on your dessert tray be enough to drown out the questions? It would be a delusion, a pretend happiness, only achievable by deliberately ignoring and suspending these critical questions.

Apply this to your life. Now ask yourself, am I happy?

Until we fulfil the purpose of our creation, we can never be truly happy. We are here to worship God, which means knowing him, loving Him and obeying Him. Worshipping God is the ultimate purpose of our existence: it frees us from the slavery of ourselves, others and society. God, in the Qur'an, presents us with a powerful example:

God puts forward this illustration: can a man who has for his masters several partners at odds with each other be considered equal to a man devoted wholly to one master? All praise belongs to God, though most of them do not know. [39:29]

If we do not worship God, we still end up worshipping many 'gods'. Think about it. Our partners, our bosses, our teachers, our friends, the societies we live in, and even our own desires, 'enslave' us in some way. Take, for example, social norms. Many of us define our sense of beauty based on influential social pressures. We may have a range

of likes and dislikes, but they are shaped by others. Ask yourself, why am I wearing these trousers or this skirt? Looking deeper than just saying you like it, is to ask why do you like it? If we keep on probing in this way, many will end up admitting ‘because other people like it and other people think I look nice’. Unfortunately, many of these people will hold these views because they have been influenced by L’Oreal: Because I am Worth It.

In this respect, we have many ‘masters’ and they all want something from us. They are all ‘at odds with each other’, and we end up living confused, unfulfilled lives. God, who knows us better than we know ourselves, who loves us more than our mothers love us, is telling us that. He is our true master. Worshipping Him truly frees us. Our coming into existence is no different from being sedated and thrown on a plane. We never chose our birth. Yet many of us do not ask the questions or search for the answers that will help us achieve true happiness in this temporary life. The ultimate happiness is success in the eternal Hereafter: “***and the happy future belongs to those who are mindful of Him.***” [7:128]



Why Believe in the Qur'an?

Imagine if a stranger walked up to you and said, “I have been sent to you as a Prophet of God, follow me!” How would you react? Apart from perhaps thinking that this person sounds crazy, you would probably also ask for proof. This would be the natural reaction for most people if they were to be presented with such a momentous claim. This allows one to distinguish genuine Prophets of God from the many liars and delusional people that are out there.

The Qur'an informs us that God sent clear proofs with His messengers: **“We sent Our messengers with clear signs...”** [57:25] The Prophets were given miracles by God as evidence of their Prophethood, and to bring mankind to faith. Some examples of miracles include Moses parting the sea and Jesus healing the sick. However, these miracles were performed in the distant past. These are not signs that we can experience for ourselves today. Believers have to accept them purely on faith.

The Qur'an is the miracle of the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims believe it is the greatest miracle of all the Prophets. What makes the Qur'an different from all the other miracles is that it is a miracle which everyone can experience for themselves today, simply by opening a Qur'an and reading it. Let us look at some examples of what makes the Qur'an such an amazing book.



The Concept of God

The concept of God in the Qur'an is illustrated beautifully with the story of Abraham:

Long ago We bestowed right judgement on Abraham and We knew him well.

He said to his father and his people, 'What are these images to which you are so devoted?'

They replied, 'We found our fathers worshiping them.'

He said, 'You and your fathers have clearly gone astray.'

They asked, 'Have you brought us the truth or are you just playing about?'

He said, 'Listen! Your true Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, He who created them, and I am a witness to this.'

By God I shall certainly plot against your idols as soon as you have turned your backs!'

He broke them all into pieces, but left the biggest one for them to return to.

***They said, ‘Who has done this to our gods?
How wicked he must be!’***

***Some said, ‘We heard a youth called Abraham
talking about them.’***

***They said, ‘Bring him before the eyes of the
people, so that they may witness [his trial].’***

***They asked, ‘Was it you, Abraham, who did this
to our gods?’***

***He said, ‘No, it was done by the biggest of them—
this one. Ask them, if they can talk.’***

***They turned to one another, saying, ‘It is you
who are in the wrong,’***

***But then they lapsed again and said, ‘You know
very well these gods cannot speak.’***

***Abraham said, ‘How can you worship what can
neither benefit nor harm you, instead of God?
[21:51-66]***

The Qur'an shows us that worshipping anything created, such as idols, is illogical. As the story of Abraham demonstrates, he was able to smash the idols to pieces. Since idols are not able to defend themselves, then they obviously cannot benefit or harm us, so why should mankind take them as gods? Rather, we should worship God - the one that gave us life, sustains us and will take our souls when we die.

Now, have a think about the various gods and goddesses that are worshipped in religions other than Islam. Are they not similar in appearance and nature to human beings and animals? Do they not all have weaknesses and shortcomings? We are now going to refer back to the 112th chapter of the Qur'an. We will use this chapter as

a measuring stick by which we will compare all gods and goddesses to the Qur'an's concept of God:

**Say, 'He is God the One,
God the eternal.
He begot no one nor was He begotten.
No one is comparable to Him.' [Chapter 112]**

Amazingly, there is no god or goddess who measures up to the Qur'an's concept of God. All other deities fall short. Give it a try: think of a deity from an idol-worshipping religion and see if it can measure up to the Qur'anic standard. If the god is part of the creation, for example, they were born or died, then they fall short of the verse "**God the eternal**". If they look like anything in the creation, for example, a human being or animal, then they fall short of the verse "**No one is comparable to Him**". In just four short verses, the Qur'an shows that every other deity that is, and has ever been, worshipped by man, is inferior to God Almighty and therefore not worthy of worship. Should we not worship only that which is worthy, something that has no equal? As we have seen, it is only the Qur'anic concept of God that does true justice to our Creator's majesty, supremacy and power.



Preservation

Have you ever thought about how the religious scriptures that we have today have been passed down to us throughout history? Thanks to innovations like the printing press, we live in a world which allows for the mass distribution of information. Therefore, we no longer have to worry about the loss of our religious scriptures. In fact, we have probably taken their preservation for granted. However, advances in technology, such as printing, only account for a small portion of the histories of most religious texts, which span thousands of years. The vast majority of religious texts today have been passed down to us by the scribal tradition, whereby manuscripts are manually copied, word for word, by hand, using materials like ink and leather.

Is this method of preserving information reliable? Have a think about communication in the modern world, such as email or text messages. Have you ever sent an email or text message that contains spelling and grammar mistakes, even with the benefit of spell check features that exist in modern computers and phones? Even professional media outlets often print newspapers and magazines with grammatical mistakes. Now imagine having to copy an entire book of hundreds of pages, manually by hand, using only paper and ink, without relying on modern technology. It would undoubtedly be filled with mistakes.

This is exactly what we find when we compare the manuscript copies of religious texts from the past. They are filled with spelling mistakes, missing words and sentences. There were even cases where scribes made intentional changes to suit an agenda. It was easy to do this without most people realising because literacy rates in the ancient past were very low and there were very few scribes. Now extend this copying process over hundreds or thousands of years.

You can imagine how much a text can change over such a long span of time, as accidental and intentional changes gradually creep in.

Now imagine if you had the task of evaluating all these written copies with their different words and sentences. You would have to compare each of them to the original, word by word and line by line. This would be an extremely time-consuming task, but if you had enough time, or enough people helping you, eventually you could work out which copies are the most accurate when compared to the original. Now imagine if you had to perform the same task of evaluating all these variations, but this time you do not possess the original to compare against. It would almost be impossible to determine their accuracy. This brings us to another major problem with relying on physical manuscripts for the preservation of information: over time they can be lost or become damaged. As such, we do not always have access to the original or even early copies. Therefore we lose the ability to determine which of the copies we possess is the most accurate.

Muslims believe God sent down the Qur'an to Muhammad and other revelations to the other Prophets. We believe in what was originally sent down to Moses and Jesus. For the sake of comparison, let us examine the state of the Bible today. What we find is exactly what one would expect of any ancient text which has been manually copied over thousands of years. There are numerous versions of the Bible in existence today. The oldest manuscripts that have survived happen to be dated to hundreds of years after their original revelation. Given what we have discussed about the difficulties of copying texts by hand, now we can appreciate why there are different versions of the Bible. Scholars of the Bible, those who are experts in sifting through the huge number of variations that exist in the manuscript tradition, cannot agree on which copies are the most accurate. This is because they have the difficult task of estimating which copies are closest to the original without possessing the original to compare against. Each version of the Bible that exists is a patchwork of different copies combined together and represents what a particular scholar, or group of scholars, estimate to be the closest match to the original. So with texts that have relied on manual copying for pres-

ervation, at best we can say that we have an estimate of the original words. We cannot say with 100 percent certainty that what we have today, however, is an accurate representation of the original.

Now that we have a background to the transmission of ancient texts, let us turn our attention to the Qur'an. What about the Qur'an? Has its preservation also been compromised? The author of the Qur'an makes a bold claim: "**We have sent down the Qur'an Ourselves, and We Ourselves will guard it**" [15:9] God blessed His final revelation, the Qur'an, with something that was not bestowed on any of the prior Scriptures: He promised to protect and preserve it from any corruption. You might be wondering how such a bold claim can be true in the light of what we know about the consistent corruption of previous religious Scriptures throughout history.

Unlike other Scriptures, the primary means of preserving the Qur'an has, and always will be, through memorisation: "**And We have certainly made the Qur'an easy for remembrance, so is there any who will remember?**" [54:17] Is memorisation really a practical way of preserving the Qur'an? One of the ways that God made the Qur'an easy to remember is the unique style of the Qur'an itself; it has a rhyming style much like poetry.

Have a think back to when you were at school. Most of us have probably forgotten many of the finer details of what we learnt at school, such as the dates of various events we studied in subjects like History, or the formulas and equations we learnt in subjects like Mathematics and Physics. This is because we have not used the knowledge since leaving school and human beings naturally forget things over time. What is interesting is that many of us can easily recall the words of the nursery rhymes we used to sing in school, or even the lyrics of a song we have not listened to in years. The difference is that the words of nursery rhymes and the lyrics of songs have a certain rhyme and rhythm that allows us to easily recall the information, even without making a conscious effort to remember it. Much in the same way then, since the Qur'an rhymes like poetry, and has a strong rhythm, it is easy to memorise.

The Prophet Muhammad was tasked by God with memorising, transmitting and explaining the verses of the Qur'an to the Muslims, as they were revealed from God to him through the Angel Gabriel:

“Truly, this Qur'an has been sent down by the Lord of the Worlds: the Trustworthy Spirit [Angel Gabriel] brought it down to your heart [Prophet], so that you could bring warning” [26:192-194] In turn, these Muslims who had learnt the Qur'an directly from the Prophet Muhammad himself, known as the Companions, passed on what they had memorised to neighbouring tribes and nations. It must be noted that the Qur'an was revealed gradually to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of 23 years:

The disbelievers also say, ‘Why was the Qur'an not sent down to him all at once?’ We sent it in this way to strengthen your heart [The Prophet]; We gave it to you in gradual revelation. [25:32]

Gradual revelation was a wise way of facilitating the memorisation of the Qur'an by the early Muslims at large. It should be noted that the revelations of previous Prophets, such as Moses, were not gradual but rather given all at once. The Qur'an informs us about Moses:

We inscribed everything for him in the Tablets which taught and explained everything, saying, ‘Hold on to them firmly and urge your people to hold fast to their excellent teachings. I will show you the end of those who rebel.’ [7:145]

This legacy of mass memorisation has continued throughout Islamic history. Muslims today have no doubt about the perfect preservation of the Qur'an. This oral tradition spanning nearly 1,500 years has seen the Qur'an being passed down from teacher to student in an unbroken chain going all the way back to the Prophet Muhammad himself. Today, it is estimated that there are many millions of Muslims who have memorised the entire Qur'an, from cover to cover, in its original Arabic.

This is a testament to the promise made by God to protect the Qur'an. The Orientalist scholar William Graham stated that the Qur'an is perhaps the only book, religious or secular, that has been memorised completely by millions of people [5]. Here are just a few examples of what some other non-Muslim textual scholars have to say about the preservation of the Qur'an:

The Orientalist A.T. Welch writes:

For Muslims the Qur'an is much more than scripture or sacred literature in the usual Western sense. Its primary significance for the vast majority through the centuries has been in its oral form, the form in which it first appeared, as the "recitation" chanted by Muhammad to his followers over a period of about twenty years... The revelations were memorized by some of Muhammad's followers during his lifetime, and the oral tradition that was thus, established has had a continuous history ever since, in some ways independent of, and superior to, the written Qur'an... Through the centuries the oral tradition of the entire Qur'an has been maintained by the professional reciters. Until recently, the significance of the recited Qur'an has seldom been fully appreciated in the West. [6]

Bible scholar Kenneth Cragg reflects that:

This phenomenon of Qur'anic recital means that the text has traversed the centuries in an unbroken living sequence of devotion. It cannot, therefore, be handled as an antiquarian thing, nor as a historical document out of a distant past. The fact of hifdh (Qur'anic memorization) has made the Qur'an a present possession

through all the lapse of Muslim time and given it a human currency in every generation, never allowing its relegation to a bare authority for reference alone. [7]

It must be pointed out that every Muslim of the estimated 1.5 billion Muslims in the world memorises at least some parts of the Qur'an in Arabic, in order to be able to pray like the Prophet Muhammad. In fact, if every written copy of religious Scriptures in existence today were to be somehow destroyed, then it is only the Qur'an that could be recreated perfectly, thanks to its mass memorisation. Those who memorise the Qur'an are people of all ages. The vast majority are not Arabs and do not even speak Arabic as a language.

The oral tradition of the Qur'an is a phenomenon unique to Islam. Is there any reason to doubt the reliability of the oral tradition? The estimated millions who have memorised the Qur'an in the world have learnt the Qur'an via a direct transmission starting from the Prophet Muhammad himself. The implications of this are astonishing. If millions of people who have memorised the Qur'an can trace their oral memorisation of the Qur'an down the centuries of teachers and scholars, all the way back to the Prophet himself, who could doubt the authenticity of this oral tradition? This is especially so if these millions of memorisers live in different places in the world, and have learnt the Qur'an from different teachers and scholars. The amount of varying oral transmissions and the amount of people who have learnt the Qur'an, and the fact there are no discrepancies in what they have memorised, is not a historical accident. The conclusion can only be that the Qur'an memorised today is the one that was taught over 1,400 years ago. There is no other rational explanation for this unique oral phenomenon, unless someone argues that all of these memorisers throughout the ages - at different points in time and different places in the world - somehow came together to ensure that they all memorised and recited the exact same Qur'an. To pose such an argument, however, is conspiratorial and absurd.

TAJWEED

We have so far discussed the preservation of the Qur'an from the point of view of its linguistic content, the words and verses that make it up. Amazingly, we can take things a step further. In addition to the mass memorisation of the content of the Qur'an, another unique aspect of its preservation is that the rules and regulations for pronouncing each individual letter have also been safeguarded. This ensures that Muslims not only recite the same content as the Prophet Muhammad, but also in exactly the same style.

You may be wondering to yourself, why is this important? Perhaps the easiest way to appreciate the significance of preserving the recitation style of the Qur'an, is a comparison with the game of Telephone. Just in case you are not familiar with this game, it involves a group of people whispering the same message to each other. Starting with the first person, they will whisper a message to the person next to them, who will then do the same with the person next to them, and so on and so forth, until the message reaches the last person in the group. You then compare the message between the first and last person to see how much it has changed. Typically, what you find is that by the time the message reaches the final person, it has changed significantly.

Let us take a look at a simple example to make things clear. Imagine that the first person says the following message to the person next to them: "***We are going to advance. Send reinforcements.***"

This person then passes on the message but shortens "We are" because the first person spoke very quickly: "***We're going to advance. Send reinforcements.***"

The next person then passes on the message as follows and changes "advance" because the second person did not pronounce the letter 'v' correctly: "***We're going to a dance. Send reinforcements.***"

Finally, the last person changes the end of the message because English is not their first language and they are unfamiliar with the word "reinforcements": "***We're going to a dance. Send four cents.***"

As you can see, there are various reasons why the message has changed by the time it reaches the ear of the last person. For example, the people in the group may speak at different speeds, they may intonate their words differently and they may even have different regional accents, which could lead to letters of the alphabet being pronounced differently. Ultimately, what this demonstrates is that without a systematic means of ensuring the preservation of the recitation style of the Qur'an - that is, the correct pronunciation of each letter of the Arabic alphabet, the speed of its recitation, the stopping points in the verses and so on - its mass memorisation would be like a giant unsupervised game of Telephone. Changes would inevitably creep in over time, as they did in the Bible.

What inspired Muslims to pay such attention to detail? When God revealed the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad, it was recited to him in a specific manner. The Qur'an itself commands Muslims to recite it in this same specific way: “...recite the Qur'an slowly and distinctly” [73:4] Therefore, Muslims throughout history have placed great importance on how they recite the Qur'an. This has led to the creation of an intricate science known as Tajweed. Tajweed sets out rules and regulations to preserve the Prophet Muhammad's recitation style. The fact that today we can find millions of Muslims of all different nationalities who are able to recite the Qur'an, as if they themselves were Arabs living during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, is proof of the effectiveness of this science in preserving the aural integrity of the text. This is in spite of the fact that there is no internationally centralised religious organisation to administer such preservation.

Further evidence for the reliability of this method of preserving the Qur'an is in the recitation of the Qur'an itself. In millions of mosques throughout the world, every day, these memorisers who originate from different parts of the world, and learnt at the feet of different scholars, mix together and recite the Qur'an with one another. Any mistakes in recitation are immediately corrected by the congregation, and yet there is never any disagreement about the Qur'an itself. You can now appreciate why Muslims

have certainty in the perfect preservation of the Qur'an. Not only do we have to believe it from a theological perspective, but we also know it to be true from a historical and experiential one.

LANGUAGE

As has been discussed so far, the Qur'an has been preserved in both content and recitation style. To this, we can add that the Qur'an has also been preserved in meaning. Why is this important? You cannot separate language from Scripture. As God states below, the Qur'an is tied to the Arabic language: ***"We have made it a Qur'an in Arabic..." [43:3]*** So if we were to lose the Arabic language, we would also lose the Qur'an. There is not much benefit in having the perfect preservation of the content of a Scripture if we have lost the meanings of the words it is written in. You may be wondering, can languages really change in drastic ways over time? Let us take English as an example. If we were alive in 14th century England, the word 'nice' would have a very different meaning to how we use it today. This word is derived from the Latin "nescius" meaning "ignorant". The word began life in the 14th century as a term for "foolish" or "silly". Later, it took on the more neutral attributes of shyness and reserve. Later, in the 18th century, English society's admiration of such qualities brought on the more positive meanings of "nice" we know today. Even with this simple example, I am sure you can appreciate the impact that this can have on our understanding of a text. If we do not take great care in preserving the original meanings of words, then our understanding of ancient texts can become distorted. Even worse, languages can be lost completely. The ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs are a good example. This language, which can be found in pyramids and is made up of pictures rather than words, was lost for thousands of years when the ancient Egyptian civilisation became extinct. These examples demonstrate the important role that language plays in the preservation of any text.

The oldest Arabic language dictionary in existence was published within two hundred years of the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The early compilation of Arabic dictionaries has ensured that none of the meanings of the words of the Qur'an have ever been lost.

To put this into perspective, with the Judaic tradition, the Torah was originally revealed to Moses over three thousand years ago, making it over 1,500 years older than the Qur'an. However, the first Hebrew dictionary was not created until the 10th century [8] – some three hundred years after the revelation of the Qur'an. Hebrew was a dead language from the 2nd century CE until the foundation of Israel [9]. As a consequence of this, Bible scholars had to turn to the vocabulary found in Arabic dictionaries to assist in understanding the many obscure and problematic Hebrew words in the Old Testament. Because Arabic and Hebrew are both part of the Semitic family of languages, they have many similarities, and so the Arabic language has been used, since the Middle Ages, to understand difficult words and expressions in Biblical Hebrew. Even in the present day, commentaries and articles written by Bible scholars regularly cite evidence from Arabic in support of a particular meaning for a Hebrew word or passage [10]. It is a very interesting point that in order to fully understand Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, Bible scholars have to rely on classical Arabic, the language of the Qur'an!

What about the Arabic language in general? Is there any special benefit in revealing the Qur'an in Arabic? There are many benefits that the Arabic language possesses. It is an eloquent language, with a rich vocabulary, which makes it an ideal medium for accurately conveying concepts and ideas. This richness of vocabulary also allows one to convey a lot of information in a concise manner. This conciseness has the benefit of aiding the memorisation of the Qur'an. Let us take as an example the word "camel". Here are a few ways of describing different types of camel using the English language:

Male camel

Female camel

Young camel

A camel that drinks very little water

A camel that loves to escape and is difficult to catch

In each of these examples, multiple words are needed to accurately convey the specific type of camel being spoken about. This is because the English language only possesses the general word “camel” in reference to this animal. With the richness of the Arabic language, there are special words to describe each of these specific types of camel. In fact, classical Arabic has around 300 unique words to describe every kind of camel you can imagine. Let us take a look at a few verses of the Qur'an which relate to camels: ***“Then do they not look at the camels - how they are created?” [88:17]*** Here, the Arabic word used for camel, “ibili”, refers to camels in general. This conveys the point that you can look at any kind of camel and marvel at this amazing animal as an example of God's creative power. So the translation into English in this instance is an accurate representation of the original Arabic.

“Indeed, those who deny Our verses and are arrogant toward them - the gates of Heaven will not be opened for them, nor will they enter Paradise until a camel enters into the eye of a needle. And thus, do We recompense the criminals.” [7:40]

In this example, the Arabic word used for camel, “jamal”, refers to a male camel. This enhances the impact of the verse because male camels are bigger and heavier than female camels, and so the chances of a male camel entering the eye of a needle are made even more impossible. The English translation, being restricted to the general word “camel”, loses some of the impact of the original Arabic.

“And when full-term she-camels are neglected.” [81:4]

In this case, the Arabic word used for camel, “ishar”, refers to a pregnant female camel that is about to give birth. Notice how the English needs to use four words, ‘full-term’ and ‘she-camel’, to

convey the same meaning. This makes the English representation less poetic and harder to memorise as it has more words.

CONCLUSION

Before the revelation of the Qur'an, man was the caretaker of Scripture and ultimately failed in this duty. Was this poor judgement on the part of God? Absolutely not: the revelations given to Moses and Jesus, (peace be upon them both), were only ever meant to be time bound Scriptures which served as a temporary placeholder until the coming of the Qur'an. With the advent of the final messenger, Muhammad (peace be upon him), and the revelation of the final message, God took it upon Himself to protect the Qur'an. As we have seen, in every conceivable way, the Qur'an has been protected. Whether it is the preservation of its content, its recitation style or the meaning of its words, God has ensured that the Qur'an is the Scripture mankind can be certain of: ***"This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God..." [2:2]***



Timelessly Relevant

Today, we are living in a world where mankind's knowledge is progressing at a faster rate than ever before. With breakthroughs in medicine such as the decoding of human DNA, the invention of the computer and the exploration of space, the 20th century saw more technological and scientific progress than all the other centuries combined since the dawn of civilisation. Even with the benefit of the latest technology, books and journals that are published, quickly become outdated as new theories are discovered and old ones disproven. Now, imagine if you had to write a book of facts about the natural world. It would be challenging enough doing all the research and investigation needed to ensure that the book is 100 percent accurate in terms of reflecting the reality of the world we live in today. It would be even more challenging, in fact, virtually impossible, to write this book in such a way that it stands the test of time and is still accurate 10, 100 and 1,000 years from now.

To demonstrate why this is the case, let us take the example of classical physics. For several centuries, Newtonian physics, which is the idea that the universe was like one very large mechanical system, operating according to precise mathematical laws, underpinned much of science. Everything in the universe was thought to act either as a wave or particle, and with this assumption it was thought that science was verging on a complete model of the universe. Then, in the 1920s, the world of physics was turned upside down. Firstly, Einstein's theory of relativity brought into question the very nature of time. Secondly, experiments had shown that many of the classical

laws of physics break down at the atomic and subatomic level.

No longer could scientists think of the universe in purely mechanical, deterministic terms. Thus, Newton's clockwork universe, in which everything was thought to be predictable, gave way to the quantum universe which is seemingly unpredictable. You might be thinking, how is it even possible to have science based on uncertainty, is science not about trying to be certain about how the world works? But that is exactly what the quantum revolution was - it turned our world upside down and it just goes to show how even the most fundamental theories about our universe can be completely overthrown in an instant.

If this is the case with books in our modern age, then what about books written in the past? Just think about the level of knowledge about the natural world 1,400 years ago, when the Qur'an was first revealed. No one would expect a book from over 1,400 years ago to be free of scientific error. Moreover, books from the ancient past tend to be filled with myths and legends: mankind lacked the technology we have today and so came to many incorrect conclusions about how the natural world works. Legends and myths were invented because they lacked a means of scientifically explaining the world around them. Of course, some thinkers and philosophers at that time still managed to make some amazing discoveries, such as accurately estimating the circumference of the earth, but for everything they got right, they also got a lot wrong.

Yet when one reads the Qur'an, you find a distinct characteristic: the descriptions of the natural world in the Qur'an seem remarkably timeless. The Qur'an addresses various levels of intellect, at various times, and has a whole host of meanings for a particular word that it uses to describe the natural world. These words can relate to the past and present understanding of the physical world, and they can relate to non-scientific meanings too; they can be spiritual and moral insights. Let us take a look at some examples:

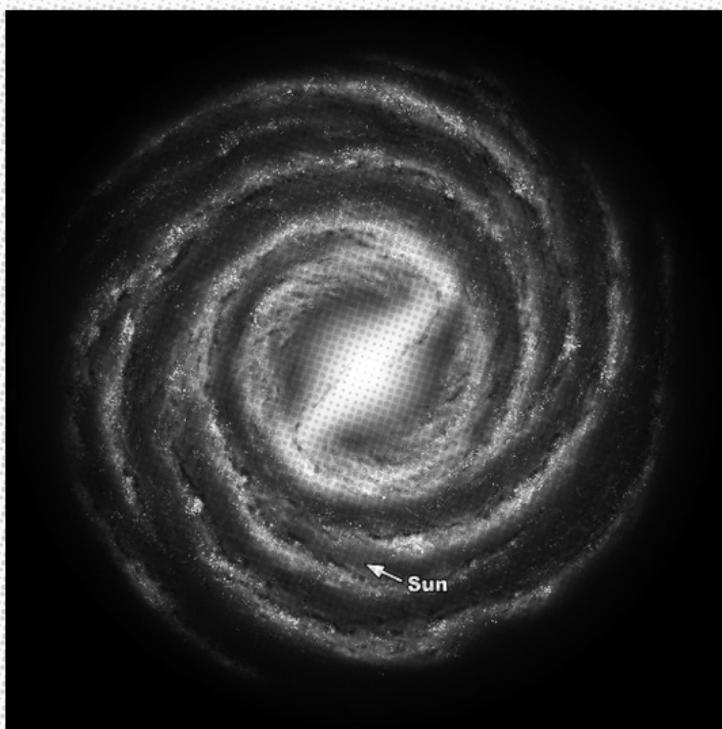
i. The Orbits of Planets.

“And it is He who created the night and the day and the sun and the moon; all [heavenly bodies] in an orbit are swimming.” [21:33]

At the time of revelation of the Qur'an, the Arabic word in the verse used to describe the motion of the Sun and the Moon, “yasbahuna”, which means swimming or floating, would have made sense to the 7th century desert Arabs because they could observe planets with the naked eye. But the word also makes sense to us in the 21st century, as it can relate to today's scientific findings on celestial mechanics: the orbits of the planets in space.

Interestingly, the above verse also mentions that the sun is floating or swimming in an orbit. This can address the 7th century primitive view that the sun was orbiting around the earth. But on closer inspection of the language used in the Qur'an, we can conclude that it can also address the accurate 21st century view that the ‘sun’ has its own orbit.

The Sun orbits the Milky Way, and according to scientists, it takes 226 million years to completely orbit around the centre of the Milky Way:



Position of the sun in the Milky Way Image Credit NASA

ii. The Expansion of the Universe.

“And the heaven We constructed with strength, and indeed, We are [its] expander.” [51:47]

The Qur'an explains that God created the universe with a power or strength and that He is the one who expands it. From a classical 7th century perspective, this verse meant that God made the universe vast and provided us with sustenance and provisions. This would have been easily appreciated and understood by 7th century listeners. However, what is remarkable is that the Arabic word used for expansion, “lamusi’una”, also means that God is actually continuously expanding the universe, or that He expanded it. This is surprisingly in line with modern discoveries that the universe is expanding.

iii. The Human Embryo.

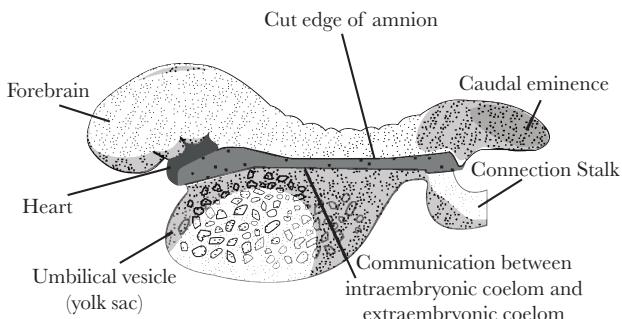
“Then We made the sperm-drop into a clinging clot.” [23:14]

The Qur'an uses the Arabic word “alaqah” to describe a stage of the development of the human embryo. This word can mean a clinging substance, a leech or a worm, a blood clot, or blood in a general sense. The ancient Greek physicians and ancient Hebrews predating the Qur'anic revelation also described the embryo as a clinging substance and a blood clot [11]. This perspective supports the predominant scientific view of the time.

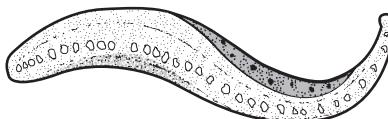
The word “alaqah” also refers to a worm or a leech. This is perfectly in line with our modern understanding of embryology, as this description of the early stage of the developing embryo matches the external and internal appearance of the leech:

The External appearance of the Leech

A. Human Embryo at 24-25 days



B. Leech or Bloodsucker



Drawings Illustrating the similarities in appearance between a human embryo and a leech ('alaqah). **A**, shows a lateral view of an embryo (size 2.5-3.0mm) at days 24 to 25 during folding, showing the large forebrain and the ventral position of the heart (from Moore & Persaud: *The Developing Human 8th Edition*). **B**, shows a drawing of a leech. Note the leech-like appearance of the human embryo at this stage.



A.Human Embryo at 24-25 days



B.Leech or Bloodsucker

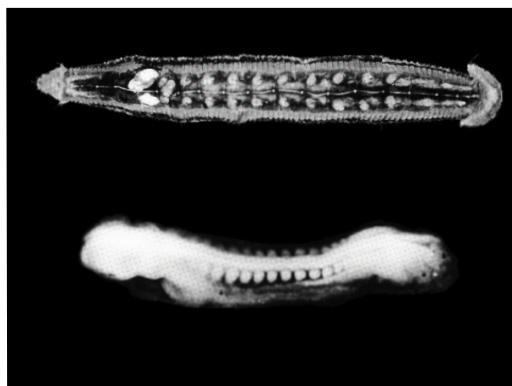


C.Human Embryo at 26-30 days

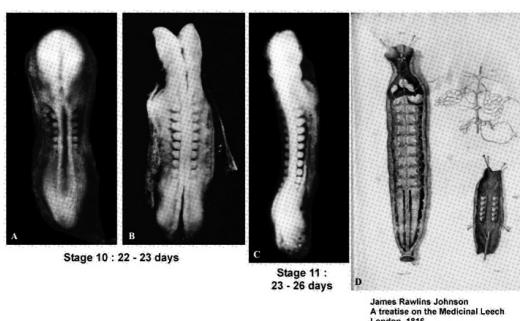
A, shows a lateral view of an embryo (size 2.5-3.0mm) at days 24 to 25 during folding, showing the large forebrain and the ventral position of the heart (from Moore & Persaud: *The Developing Human 8th Edition*).

B, Hirudo medicinalis, medicinal leech (modified from *The Human Body. The incredible Journey from Birth to Death.* c BBC Worldwide Ltd, 1998)

C, Scanning electron micrograph of an embryo at Week 4, 26-30 days. (Professor Kathy Sulik, The University of North Carolina). Note the leech-like appearance of the human embryo at this stage.



A, Ventral dissection showing the internal anatomical structure of a leech. (From J.G. Nicholls and D. Van Essen. *The nervous system of the leech*, 1974, Scientific American 230:38-48.) **B**, Dorsal view of 13-somite Japan. Note the remarkable similarity in appearance between the human embryo and the internal structure of the leech.



Dorsal views of embryos during the third and fourth week. **A**, Dorsal view of 5-somite embryo, actual size 2.5mm. **B**, Dorsal view of an older eight somite embryo, actual size 3.0mm. **C**, Dorsal view of 13-somite embryo at approximately 24 days, actual size 3.9mm. (Photographs from Professor Hideo Nishimura, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan.) **D**, The anatomical structure of the leech. (Illustrated by James Rawlins, *A Treatise on the Medicinal Leech*, London, 1816. (Rare- In process) UCLA Biomedical Library: History and Special Collections for the Sciences).

It is remarkable how much the embryo at this early stage resembles a leech. As there were no microscopes or lenses available in the 7th century, doctors would not have known that the human embryo had this leech-like appearance. Amazingly, this view of the embryo could only have been discovered after the 15th century, with the invention of the microscope, over 1,000 years after the Qur'an. Although the embryo at this stage is just visible to the naked eye, it is about the size of a wheat kernel, and the details of the embryo cannot be seen without a microscope [12].

In fact, even after the invention of the microscope, several scientists around the year 1720 CE claimed to have observed under the microscope extremely minute forms of men complete with arms, heads and legs within human spermatozoa. Another scientist insisted that he had seen a minute horse in the semen of a horse, a similar creature but with very long ears in the semen of a donkey, and tiny cockerels in the semen of a cockerel! Inadequate observation or faulty experiment led to many false theories [13].

It is even more remarkable if we consider that not only is the embryo extremely small at this stage (about 3.5mm), but that this “leech-like” appearance lasts only for a very short period of time - perhaps four to five days or so. This makes even modern observation of this likeness during this period extremely difficult.

Another notable and interesting implication is that the leech acts like a parasite, as it clings on to its host and starts to suck its blood. The embryo can also be likened to a parasite where it drains the resources of its mother. Hence, we should lower the wing of humility and mercy for our parents, especially our mothers, as they endured hardship in order for us to be here today. This raises the perspective that we are not truly independent, self-sufficient or free, as even since our development in the womb we were dependent on our mothers. This should instil a sense of humility and an understanding that we are all dependent on each other in some way, and ultimately dependent on God.

THE LIMITATIONS OF SCIENCE

Science has changed the world. From medicine to telecommunications, science has improved our lives and well-being in ways that no other field of study has achieved. Simply put, science continually elevates our lives, and our understanding of the world and the universe. Thus, it is not surprising that many of us see science as the yardstick for truth, or as the only way to establish the truth about man, life and the universe. Although science is phenomenal, it cannot answer all the questions. It has limitations and it cannot be our only way to understand reality.

The claim that science is the only method to find out the truth about mankind, life and the universe is wrong. Science cannot prove moral truths, like what is right and wrong. Science tells us what is, not what ought to be. In this sense, science is amoral; it is not an appropriate means of making moral decisions. Whilst it may be used to support our moral decisions, ethical choices are beyond science.

Not only is science limited by its inability to address all the questions about life and reality, but it also does not provide certainty. Certainty is not a word that scientists like to use because of the process of induction. Induction is a thinking process used in science where one makes conclusions by moving from the particular to the general. Here is an example of induction:

I have observed that punching a boxing bag properly with protective gloves never causes injury. Therefore no one will be injured using a boxing bag.

As can be seen from the example above, induction faces a key problem: the inability to guarantee the conclusion. A sweeping generalisation cannot be made from a limited number of observations. Immediately we see that induction does not provide certainty: we cannot guarantee the next observation will agree with our conclusion. This is because there is always the possibility of new observations which contradict the previous observations or conclu-

sions. This is why science continually changes. One day you will read in a popular magazine or newspaper that coffee is good for your heart, and in another that coffee is bad for your heart.

Thus, we cannot use science alone to establish religious truths. Science changes and improves, whereas religious claims are static, unchanging and timeless. However, as we have seen from the examples of the Qur'an in this chapter, this does not mean that religion and science contradict each other.

CONCLUSION

The Qur'an is a book that makes you think; it encourages reflection and deep thought. Many of the statements in the Qur'an concerning the natural world communicate on various levels, and have a range of accurate meanings. It has the ability to engage with various audiences, whether 7th century or 21st century, and yet still remain valid. This should surely make one think about who authored this book. These are all signs that point to the power and wisdom of the natural world's Creator, that everything around us is not here by chance or for entertainment, but rather for a profound and noble purpose.



Literary Features

Usually when one thinks of literature, one considers written text. As we have seen in the earlier section on the preservation of the Qur'an, however, it was originally delivered to its first audience in the form of speech, not writing. There is a fundamental difference between written and oral communication. This is best demonstrated with an example. Imagine having to deliver a speech with little preparation time. Imagine being in front of a large audience right now, and having to improvise answers to different questions being asked, without having done any research into the topic being discussed. Now compare this scenario with being asked to prepare a written article on the same topic. This time it is for a magazine. You have been told the topic beforehand and you have a month to complete the work. Which scenario do you think would result in better communication? As I am sure you realise, the key difference is that with live, unplanned oral communication, you do not have the benefit of editing, whereas when it comes to written work, you have the opportunity to keep improving the quality of the writing.

Let us now apply this idea to the Qur'an. The entire Qur'an was first delivered to its audience, a mixture of believers and non-believers, in the form of speech. The Qur'an often did not have the opportunity for an editorial process. Many verses were revealed suddenly as a response to unplanned questions and challenges that were brought forward to the Prophet Muhammad from both believers and non-believers. Here are a few examples from the Qur'an, which demonstrate the spontaneous nature of its revelation:

[Prophet], they ask you about the Spirit. Say, ‘The Spirit is part of my Lord’s domain. You have only been given a little knowledge.’ [17:85]

They ask you [Prophet] about intoxicants and gambling: say, ‘There is great sin in both, and some benefit for people: the sin is greater than the benefit...’ [2:219]

Moreover, had the Qur'an been originally transmitted with any literary weaknesses, it would have been extremely difficult to correct or retract them given what we know of the early, rapid, mass transmission of the Qur'an. In the face of all these obstacles, one would naturally expect the Qur'an to be filled with contradictions, mistakes, useless information and other flaws. As we will see, this could not be further from the truth. Let us take a look at a few examples of features that make the Qur'an a literary masterpiece, against all odds:

i. Subtlety.

“God does not put two hearts within a man’s breast. He does not turn the wives you reject and liken to your mothers’ backs into your real mothers...” [33:4]

God stated that He has not placed two hearts into any man. This statement therefore excludes women, despite the fact that women are spoken about in this very verse. Had God said that He has not placed two hearts inside of any person, then women would have been included, but then there would be an issue if this verse were to be interpreted literally: women can have two or more hearts inside them when they are pregnant. The difference is very subtle; it is a change of only one word, but the impact is significant.

ii. Robustness.

“Do they not consider the Qur'an (with care)? Had it been from other than God, they would surely have found there-in many contradictions.” [4:82]

There are two methods of examining whether the Qur'an is what it claims to be, depending on how one chooses to interpret the above words.

You can take the clear and apparent meaning of the verse, which would involve reading the whole book, verifying that it contains no contradictions and then passing a verdict.

But you could also take a different meaning, a more abstract one, such as follows: ***"Do they not consider the Qur'an (with care)? Had it been from other than God, they would surely have found therein many [occurrences of the word] contradictions."* [4:82]**

This more abstract understanding would involve just counting the number of times the word "contradictions" is written in the Qur'an. Think of it a bit like doing a Google search within the pages of the Qur'an for the word "contradictions". If you get a count of more than one, then you have found the word "contradictions" many times, and so you can conclude that the Qur'an is not from God. The Qur'an would have disproven itself!

If you were to undertake this counting exercise, then what you will find is that the singular form of the word, "contradiction", occurs many times throughout the Qur'an. But the word "contradictions" occurs only once - in the verse that we are analysing.

What we can conclude is that the Qur'an is robust and stands up against the many different possible ways that its reader may wish to interpret its words.

iii. Word Order.

***"(O Muslims) Your (real) friends are God, His Messenger [Muhammad], and the (Fellowship Of) Believers, those who establish regular prayers and regular charity, and they bow down humbly (in worship)."* [5:55]**

At the time this verse was revealed, there were hypocrites, those who professed to be Muslim publicly but inwardly were disbelievers, living amongst the ranks of the true Muslim believers. It was very difficult to distinguish the hypocrites from the true believers based on outward appearance and actions, as they prayed and performed other acts of worship publicly, just like the true believers. Note the order of the following statements as we find them within the verse: **“the (Fellowship Of) Believers (are) those who establish regular prayers and regular charity.”** It could have been written the other way around: **“Those who establish regular prayers and regular charity (are) the (Fellowship Of) Believers.”** Then the implication would be that even the hypocrites are true believers, because they prayed and gave charity just like the Muslims! But God chose the perfect order for the words within the verse: the true believers are those that pray and give charity.

iv. Precision.

Moses said to his people, ‘My people, why do you hurt me when you know that I am sent to you by God?’ When they went astray, God left their hearts to stray: God does not guide rebellious people. Jesus, son of Mary, said, ‘Children of Israel, I am sent to you by God...’ [61:5-6]

The Prophet Moses was sent to the Israelites, as was the Prophet Jesus. Even though there was a long span of time between the two Prophets, they are both addressing the Israelites.

Notice that when Moses addresses the Israelites, he says “my people” whereas Jesus says “children of Israel”. In Jewish tradition, identity is given by the father. The nation itself is named after Israel, the father of the original twelve tribes that all Jews descend from. This is the case in most societies as the surname is usually acquired from the father.

So when Moses says, “my people”, he is actually saying that my father is from among you, which is the case as his father was an Israelite. But never in the Qur'an do we find Jesus saying “my people”.

Every time he addresses the Israelites he says “children of Israel”. This is because, unlike Moses, he did not have a father; his birth was miraculous through the Virgin Mary. Amazingly, this kind of precision is present throughout the Qur'an.

v. Abundance.

The 108th chapter of the Qur'an, al-Kawthar ("The Abundance"), is its smallest chapter:

***Indeed, We have granted you, [O Muhammad],
al-Kawthar (the abundance).***

***So pray to your Lord and sacrifice [to Him
alone].***

***Indeed, your enemy is the one cut off. [Chapter
108]***

This chapter was revealed at a particularly difficult point in the Prophet Muhammad's life, as his baby son had just died. The enemies of God started to taunt the Prophet Muhammad by saying that he had been “cut off”, meaning that he had been cut off from his descendants and so when he died he would not be remembered. These verses were revealed as a consolation to him, as a reminder that God had already given him an abundance of everything that is good, and a warning to his enemies by pointing out that in reality it is they who will be cut off. This is actually a prophecy, as Muhammad turned out to be the most successful Prophet, both as a man delivering a message, and as a statesman, while his enemies eventually lost their power and have been forgotten in history.

What is amazing is that this chapter consists of only three lines, less than 15 words in Arabic, and yet it represents a ‘sea of rhetoric’ - it is filled with more than 30 literary features. That is more features than the words it contains [14]. It is out of the scope of this book to cover them all, but let us look at a few examples of the literary features:

The word choice in this chapter cannot be bettered; there is not a single word that can be improved by replacing it with another word. Let us look at the last word in the first sentence, ‘al-kawthar’. This word carries the meaning of plentiful, multitude, overflowing, rich, unstinting and unending. Notice that the sentence is open-ended, it is not specified what the Prophet Muhammad has been given an abundance of. It would be like a friend of yours saying “I’ve given you lots”. You would probably wonder, “lots of what exactly”? By not stating exactly what the Prophet Muhammad has been given an abundance of, God is making the rhetorical point that he has been given an abundance of everything! Within the science of eloquence and rhetoric, mentioning all the things would be excessive and an ineffective use of language. Also notice the use of the past tense: he has been “given” an abundance; it does not say that he “will be given” an abundance which would indicate a future event. The fact that the verb has been used in the past tense indicates that it has already happened and makes it definitive, instilling a feeling of reassurance and certainty. Finally, it is worth reflecting on the name of the chapter, al-kawthar (“The Abundance”). This chapter has achieved a maximum ‘abundance’ of literary features whilst using the minimum number of words, an amazing feat.

CONCLUSION

In literature, you do not publish the first draft of a written work without going through a rigorous editorial process in order to refine the writing and make it the best it can be. You can think of the writing process like sculpting, where you start off with a block of stone or clay which you gradually chip away at. Over time, the sculpture slowly takes shape until it is completed and ready for unveiling to the general public. As we have seen in the examples above, the Qur'an has all the hallmarks of a literary masterpiece without having had the benefit of an editorial process, because of the oral and unplanned nature of its revelation. Remarkably, every page of the Qur'an is filled with such literary features. It is reasonable to conclude that they are present by design rather than coincidence.



Structure

The Qur'an is a very unique book in terms of its composition. Its 114 chapters are not arranged in chronological or thematic order. Even within the individual chapters, numerous topics can be covered with sudden switches from one topic to another and then back again. This unique structure on the face of it may appear to be disorganised. However, modern research has discovered a sophisticated structural coherence in the Qur'an known as ring composition.

THEORY OF RING COMPOSITION

Ring composition has been explained by Mary Douglas in her book *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition*. Ring composition is the equivalent of putting a mirror in the middle of the work – what is mentioned in the first half will be reflected in the second half. The central meaning of the text is placed at its centre. Imagine you were to write a short story about your day. If you were to apply a ring structure to your story, then the middle of the story would contain the most important event, and the beginning and end would contain related themes. To take a simple example:

- 1. I woke up in the morning***
- 2. I left the house.***
- 3. I bumped into a friend whom I had not seen since childhood.***
- 4. I came back home.***
- 5. I went to sleep.***

You can see that the essence of the story, meeting a long lost friend, is placed in the middle. The parts leading up to that, waking up and leaving the house, mirror the parts after - coming home and going to sleep.

BENEFITS OF RING COMPOSITION

Ring structure not only holds the text together, but also gives focus to the important words and themes. This concentric patterning of ring composition calls attention to the centre, and we are drawn to look here for the essential message. As Mary Douglas notes concisely, “The meaning is in the middle.” [15]

It also serves as an aid in memorisation, especially useful given what we know of the preservation of the Qur'an being an oral tradition. In his study of ancient poetry, Cedric Whitman found that ring composition aids memorisation, by permitting the oral poet to easily recall the basic formulae of the composition during performances [16].

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE QUR'AN'S REVELATION

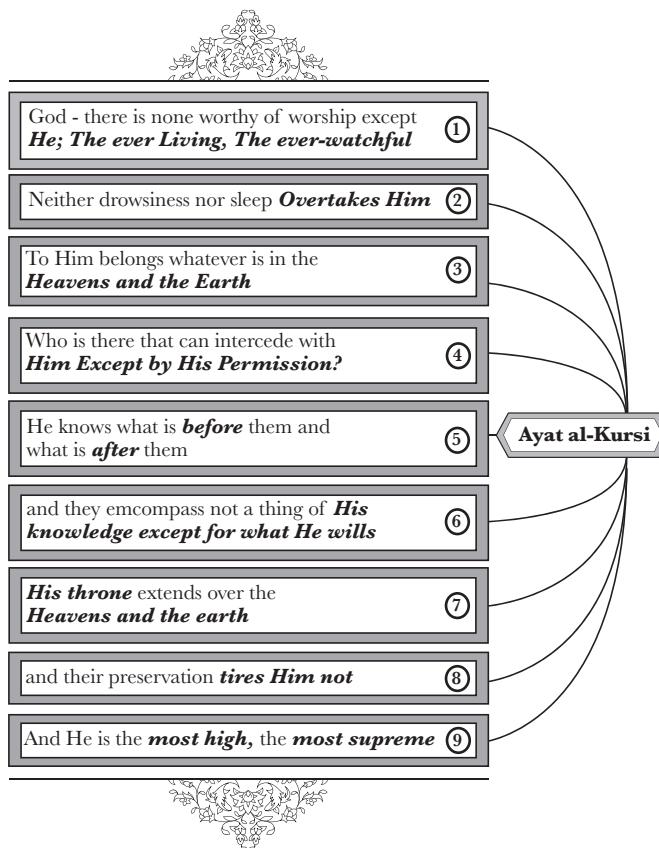
Before getting into the ring composition of the Qur'an, it is worth discussing a bit more about the background and circumstances of the Qur'an's revelation. The Qur'an was revealed gradually over a period of 23 years: **“The disbelievers also say, ‘Why was the Qur'an not sent down to him all at once?’ We sent it in this way to strengthen your heart [The Prophet]; We gave it to you in gradual revelation.” [25:32]**

Have a think about the typical way in which books are written. Most follow a pattern of a beginning, middle and end. Most people would assume that the Qur'an was revealed chronologically, starting with its first chapter and ending with its final chapter. However, the Qur'an is not like most books. You may be surprised to learn that the 6,236 verses that make up the Qur'an were not revealed sequentially in order. Chapter 1 was not followed by chapters 2, 3, 4 (and so on) as one would write a conventional book. Rather, chapter 96

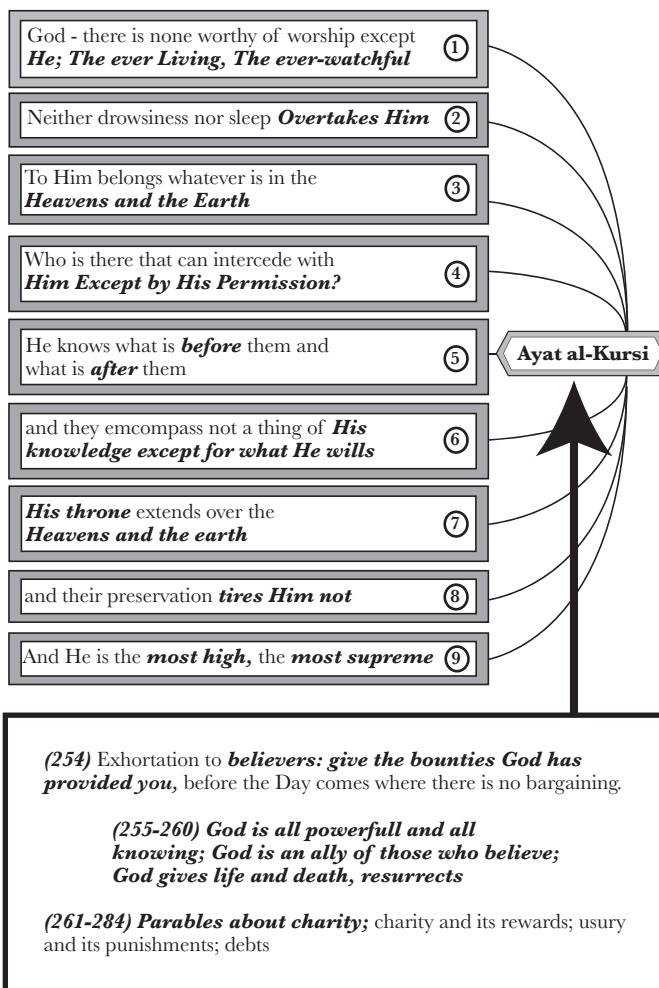
was followed by chapter 68, which was followed by chapter 73 (and so on). Moreover, a few of the chapters of the Qur'an are quite large in size, with hundreds of verses. They were not revealed all at once; some chapters were revealed over a span of many years, with the revelation of their verses being interspersed with the revelation of verses from other chapters. In the light of these circumstances, would you not expect the structure of the Qur'an to be jumbled? It would be difficult to plan an ordered structure in advance, when verses are being revealed in such an apparently random fashion. What we find against all odds however, is that the Qur'an contains the sophisticated structure of ring composition.

THE RING COMPOSITION OF THE QUR'AN

The 2nd chapter of the Qur'an, al-Baqarah or "The Cow", which we are going to use as a case study, happens to be its longest chapter and was revealed over a span of many years. There is a special verse in the chapter of al-Baqarah, the 255th verse known as 'Ayat al-Kursi', which consists of a ring composition:



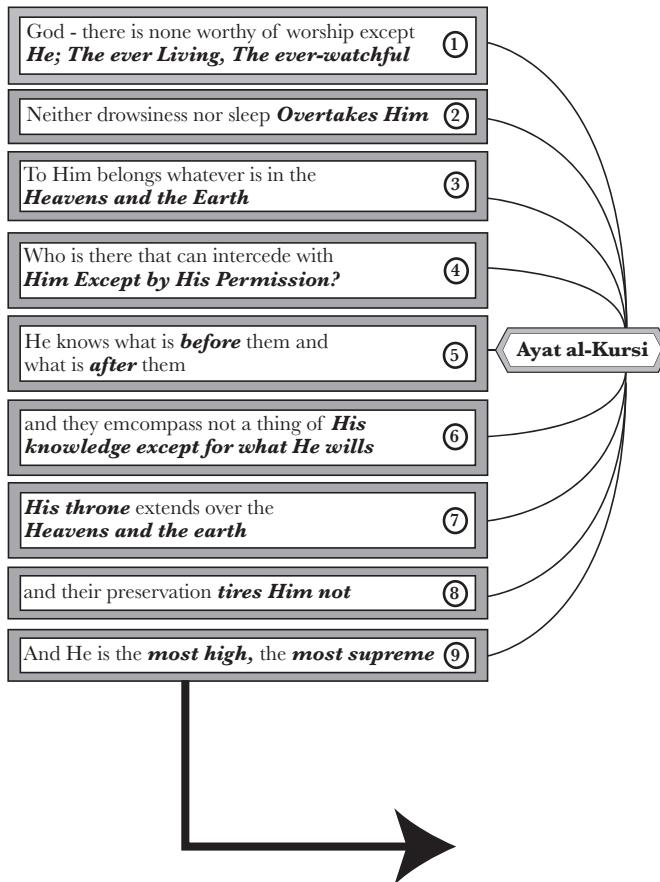
This can be taken a step further. What we find is that this verse is contained within a group of verses, verses 254 - 284, which themselves make up a larger ring. So what we have is a ring within a ring:

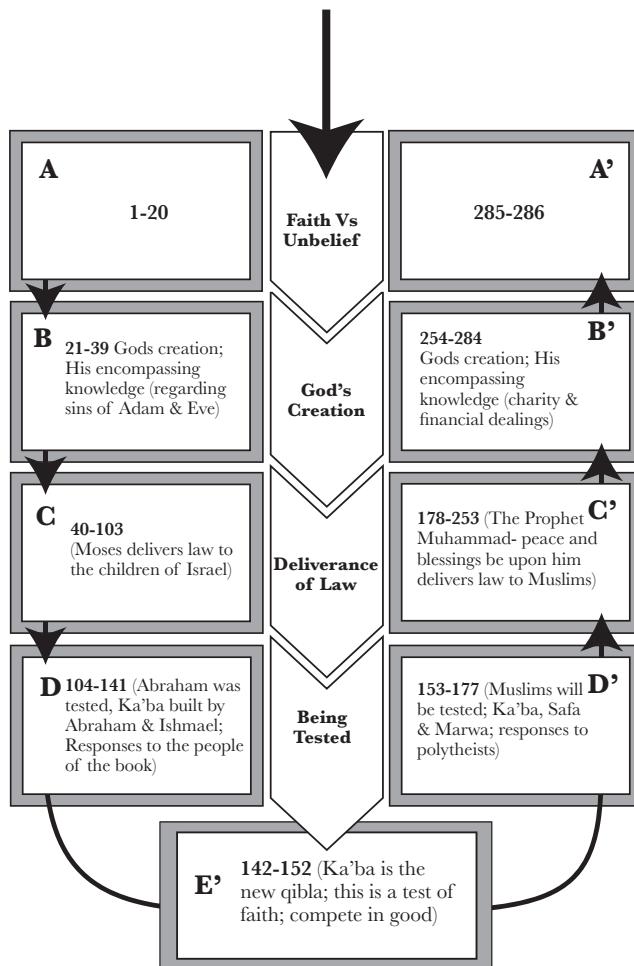


We can take this yet a step further. This group of verses represents one of nine sections that make up the entire chapter of al-Baqarah:

- 1. *Faith vs. unbelief (verses 1 – 20).***
- 2. *God's creation and knowledge (verses 21 – 39).***
- 3. *Deliverance of Law to Israelites (verses 40 – 103).***
- 4. *Abraham was tested (verses 104 – 141).***
- 5. *Ka'ba is the new qibla (verses 142 – 152).***
- 6. *Muslims will be tested (verses 153 – 177).***
- 7. *Deliverance of Law to Muslims (verses 178 – 253).***
- 8. *God's creation and knowledge (verses 254 – 284).***
- 9. *Faith vs. unbelief (verses 285 – 286).***

Each of these sections also represents a ring, so what we have is a ring within a larger ring within an even larger ring:





So not only do we have concentric rings, but if you look at the list of the nine sections above, notice how there are no breaks or gaps in the 286 verses.

Every verse from the 1st verse to the last verse, the 286th verse, is contained within a ring. Raymond K Farrin, author of *Surat al-Baqarah – A Structural Analysis*, concludes on al-Baqarah's ring composition:

Indeed this chapter exhibits marvellous justness of design. It is precisely and tightly arranged, as we have seen, according to the principles of ring composition; even the section lengths fit perfectly in the overall scheme. Moreover, the precise structure serves as a guide, pointing to key themes in the chapter. These occur, according to the logic of the pattern, at the centres of individual rings and, particularly, at the centre of the whole chapter. At the centre of the chapter, again, one finds instructions to face Mecca — this being a test of faith; identification of the Muslims as a new, middle community.

[17]

This precision in the arrangement of the verses is in fact, astonishing when we consider the timing of the revelation of the verses of the Qur'an. As Dr Abdullah Draz, Professor of Islamic Studies, eloquently puts it:

When we consider carefully the timing of the revelation of the Qur'anic passages and surahs [chapters] and their arrangement, we are profoundly astonished. We almost belie what we see and hear. We then begin to ask ourselves for an explanation of this highly improbable phenomenon: is it not true that this new passage of revelation has just been heard as new, addressing a particular event which is its only concern? Yet it sounds as though it is neither new nor separate from the rest. It seems as if it has been, along with the rest of the Qur'an, perfectly impressed on this man's mind long before he has recited

it to us... When we consider such detailed instructions on the arrangement of passages and surahs we are bound to conclude that there is a complete and detailed plan assigning the position of each passage before they are all revealed. Indeed the arrangement is made before the reasons leading to the revelation of any passage occur; and even before the start of the preliminary causes of such events... Such are the plain facts about the arrangement of the Qur'an as it was revealed in separate verses, passages and surahs over a period of 23 years. What does that tell us about its source? [18]

To better understand Dr Draz's point, let us consider the example of constructing a building. Imagine two people being supplied with materials and being tasked with building a house. The first person is experienced; they know that in order to design a well-constructed house, they need to go about the task in an organised fashion. They first wait until all of the materials, such as the bricks, cement, wood and nails, have been supplied. They would then review the materials at their disposal, assessing their quantities, sizes and shapes so that they can determine how they will best fit together. Now that they have a complete picture of the constituent parts of the house, only then do they draw up a design plan. Making a design plan cannot precede the supply and assessment of the materials because the plan depends upon the materials available. Such an approach stands a good chance of resulting in a well-constructed house.

The second person is inexperienced and they go about building the house in a disorganised fashion. Rather than waiting until they receive all of the materials and then drawing up a design plan, they instead decide to build a house without complete knowledge of its constituent parts, constructing it piecemeal, adding to it bit by bit, as and when they receive the individual materials. What are the chances that this approach will result in a well-constructed house like that of the organised person? Unlike the organised approach, where

each part is placed in its best possible position, you instead have a situation where it seems each part is placed arbitrarily, depending on the order in which they were received. In such circumstances, you would most likely end up with a very poorly designed house, liable to collapse at any time. It is highly unlikely, perhaps even impossible, that this disorganised approach would end up with the same stunningly designed house that the organised person constructed.

Yet this is exactly what we find with the structure of the Qur'an. The builder in our example is Muhammad. The house that he began to build since its first bricks were given to him is the Qur'an. Ever since he received its early verses, he started to arrange its parts. The rooms and bricks in our construction example are the chapters and verses of the Qur'an. He could never have a design plan in place for the Qur'an because the revelation of many of its verses depended on events that were out of his control, such as the social developments and religious and worldly challenges that he faced throughout his 23 years of prophethood. For example, believers would come up to him and question him on a particular matter, or his enemies would challenge him. Immediately the responses in the form of revelation would descend on him, addressing the specific situation that he was facing.

Moreover, the disordered approach we saw in our construction example is seen clearly in the Qur'an. When Muhammad received its revelations he did not wait until all its verses had been given to him. He did not wait for the chapters to be completed before deciding on their arrangement. Whenever he received the verses, they were immediately placed in their particular slot in a well-defined position in their chapter. Not a single verse placed in a particular chapter was later moved to a different one. Nor was a verse placed at the beginning or end of a chapter ever re-assigned to a different position in the same chapter at a later stage. Yet we have seen that the Qur'an has a highly precise and sophisticated structure, like that of a well-constructed house, in spite of all these difficult circumstances surrounding its revelation.

CONCLUSION

How is it possible that the Qur'an exhibits such a remarkably harmonious structure when its verses were not revealed sequentially, but in random pieces over a span of 23 years, especially given that many of the 6,236 verses of the Qur'an are tied to particular historical events? Were a human being to compose a book in such a manner, then its structure would undoubtedly be in disorder.

Moreover, when each new verse was revealed, it was immediately put into its position within its respective chapter. This position was fixed. There was no opportunity for modification or re-arrangement. How could Muhammad have devised such an intricate plan when he could not predict the events that would dictate the revelation of the verses? Such an arrangement would have to be planned in advance, but this was not possible due to these events being out of his control. This shows that the author of the Qur'an must have known the future, which is a quality of God.



Accurate predictions about the future

Many people make the claim that they can predict the future. Astrologists, clairvoyants and numerous religious scriptures put forward prophecies about the future. Is there any way that we can distinguish true prophets from the many liars and frauds that are out there? We can do so by analysing the nature of their prophecies. The predictions of false prophets are often vague in nature or lack a time frame. These characteristics make it easy for their followers to claim a fulfilment of prophecy when the inevitable happens - eventually something, somewhere, will occur which bears enough of a similarity to the prophecy that it will seem like the prophecy was an accurate prediction.

A good demonstration of this is the predictions of the 16th century French occultist Nostradamus, quite possibly the most famous and popular occultist in history. His prophecies contain French and Latin terms, historical allusions, anagrams, puns, odd spellings, partial words, inverted word order, and so on. In fact, his prophecies can be so vague that they are often described as verbal jigsaw puzzles. Here are a few examples of such prophecies:

To support the great troubled Cappe; the reds will march in order to clarify it; a family will be almost overcome by death, the red, red ones will knock down the red one. [19]

The great swarm of bees will arise, Such that one will not know whence they have come; By night the ambush, the sentinel under the vines. City delivered by five babblers not naked. [20]

Now, if Nostradamus were a true prophet, would he have needed to cloud his predictions with such vague and ambiguous language? In fact, what we find is that when Nostradamus does provide detail, such as specific dates, places and events, many of his prophecies are demonstrably false. In the following prophecy, he predicted that disease, famine and war would devastate the human race by the year 1732 CE:

From the time I am writing this [1555 CE], before 177 years, 3 months and 11 days, by pestilence, long famine, and wars, and more still by inundations, the world between this day and that, before and after, shall be diminished, and its population so reduced that there will hardly be hands enough to attend to agriculture, and the lands will be left as long without culture as they have been under tillage [21].

Even though he gave himself a window of 177 years for this prophecy to come true, it still failed to materialise. Moreover, thanks to the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century, there were major advances in agriculture which resulted in the human population exhibiting unprecedented sustained growth, the exact opposite of what Nostradamus predicted! Just one failed prophecy is enough to disqualify a person from being a genuine prophet.

What then, should we expect of prophecies from a genuine prophet of God? The purpose of spending some time looking at Nostradamus was to establish a benchmark to help us distinguish false prophets from true ones. Only genuine prophets of God, those who receive information from God, the One who has complete knowledge of the future, can get it right every time. This is the key difference between a false prophet and a true one. As we will see, by comparison, the Qur'an contains accurate predictions about the future which are clear in meaning as they provide detailed information such as timelines, the names of people and specific places:

i. Against all odds: The Byzantine victory against the Persians.

The 30th chapter of the Qur'an, named "The Byzantines", opens with the declaration of a prophecy about the victory of the Byzantines over the Persians:

The Byzantines have been defeated in a nearby land. They will reverse their defeat with a victory in a few years' time – God is in command, first and last. On that day, the believers will rejoice at God's help. [30:2-4]

This prophecy was made at a time when the Persian Empire was sweeping away everything before it. The once mighty Byzantine (Roman) Empire was suffering defeat after defeat at the hands of the Persians. The Byzantines could offer little resistance as they were being internally torn apart by political turmoil.

In order to fully appreciate the significance of this prophecy, it is necessary to understand the political context of the region shortly before the advent of Islam. These two superpowers of the region were at war with each other. For twenty years, the Byzantine Empire was overrun by Persian armies as it had never been before. The Persians took Damascus in 613 CE. This was shortly followed by the capture of Jerusalem in 614 CE. The flood of Persian conquest did not stop with the capture of Jerusalem. Egypt was next conquered

and then the Persian armies were knocking at the gates of Constantinople, the very heart of the Byzantine Empire. The humiliation of Byzantines had sunk to such low depths that the Persian Emperor Khosrau is said to have wanted to see the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius “**brought before him in chains to the foot of his throne and was not prepared to give him peace till he had abjured his crucified god and embraced the worship of the sun.**” [22].

It was in these circumstances that the Qur'an made the astonishing claim that the whole situation would soon be completely reversed by a Byzantine victory.

The first thing to note about the prophecy is the detail it provides. Not only does it give a clear indication of the two nations that are at war, but it also declares a clear victor and provides a short time frame in which it will take place. If the author of the Qur'an were guessing, then surely they would have backed the seemingly unstoppable victory of the Persians. Moreover, would the author not have played it safe by making the prophecy vague and ambiguous, just in case it did not materialise?

ii. Abu Lahab dying a disbeliever.

The 111th chapter of the Qur'an, named “The Palm Fibre”, declares that one of Islam's great enemies, Abu Lahab, would die as a disbeliever: “**May the hands of Abu Lahab be ruined! May he be ruined too! Neither his wealth nor his gains will help him: he will burn in the Flaming Fire.**” [111:1-3] Notice again how the Qur'an provides detail: it identifies a specific individual in the prophecy when the author could have played it safe by using more general language such as “a great enemy of Islam shall be ruined...” Now you may be thinking to yourself, what is so remarkable about predicting that an enemy of Islam, specific or otherwise, would die as a disbeliever? In order to appreciate the magnitude of this prophecy, we have to understand the circumstances at the time.

This claim actually gave Abu Lahab the means with which to discredit the Qur'an and thus, finish Islam once and for all, because the prophecy represents a falsification test. All Abu Lahab had to do was to outwardly pretend to be a Muslim and thus, disprove the Qur'an's prediction about him dying a disbeliever. For him to pretend to be a Muslim would not have been out of the ordinary, as many prominent enemies of Islam had already converted to the faith. There were also hypocrites who pretended to be Muslim but in reality were disbelievers.

Moreover, had Abu Lahab been alive at the time of the Muslim conquest of his home city Makkah, which took place 6 years after his death, then he would have most likely accepted the faith anyway as the whole of Makkah, his own tribe included, embraced Islam. So not only did the author of the Qur'an know his personality well enough to predict that he would not convert out of arrogance, but they also knew the date of his death would be before the conquest of Makkah. Such a claim would be a huge gamble, unless of course the author of the Qur'an could see into the future!

iii. The preservation of the Qur'an.

As we saw in the earlier section about the preservation of the Qur'an, history has not always dealt kindly with Scriptures. Prior to the Qur'an, every other revealed Scripture has either been lost or tampered with. It is with this backdrop that the author of the Qur'an makes a bold prediction about its preservation: "**We have sent down the Qur'an Ourselves, and We Ourselves will guard it.**" [15:9]

How could the author of the Qur'an have guaranteed that it would be perfectly preserved to this very day, especially considering the many social and political changes that the Muslim world has undergone in 1,400 years since the Qur'an was first revealed? Examples of such change include disputes over the succession of leadership of the Muslim world after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the deaths of memorisers of the Qur'an, the incorporation of many foreign words into the Arabic language as a result of Islam spreading

into foreign lands and mixing with new cultures and languages, and the sudden influx of non-Arabs into the religion, many of whom did not speak Arabic. The track record of all other revealed Scriptures throughout history proves that the opposite is the case: when faced with similar social and political changes to those which the Qur'an has endured, intervention with, or loss of, the text was the normal consequence. The Qur'an is the unique exception to this rule.

iv. Construction of high buildings.

The next few examples of future prophecies that we are going to look at are not verses from the Qur'an, but rather the Prophetic traditions of Muhammad. The Qur'an informs us that the Prophet Muhammad was tasked with explaining the revelation of God Almighty to mankind:

***We sent them with clear signs and scriptures.
We have sent down the message to you too
[Prophet], so that you can explain to people what
was sent for them, so that they may reflect. [16:44]***

The companions of the Prophet Muhammad, those who were responsible for memorising the Qur'an and learnt its explanation directly from him, understood the above verse to be a reference to the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. These sayings and actions have been recorded for us in the Prophetic tradition known as Hadith, which were memorised by those same companions. The Hadith contain many future prophecies, among them is the prediction about the construction of high buildings:

“Now, tell me of the Last Hour,” asked the man.

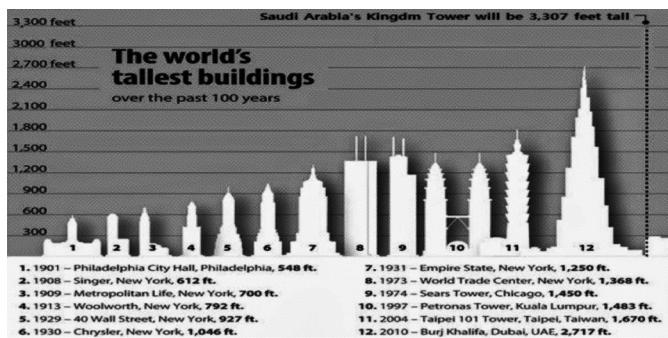
The Prophet replied, “The one asked knows no more of it than the one asking.”

***“Then tell me about its signs,” said the man.
The Prophet replied, “That you see barefoot,***

unclothed Bedouins competing in the construction of tall buildings.” [23]

First, it is worth noting the humility of the Prophet Muhammad. When asked about the “Last Hour”, meaning when will the Day of Judgement commence, he stated that he did not know any more than the one asking the question. This is because only God, the All Knowing, has knowledge of the unseen. As the Qur'an informs us, the Prophet Muhammad could not see into the future; he only had access to the information that God chose to inspire him with: ***“He is the One who knows what is hidden. He does not disclose it except to a messenger of His choosing. He sends watchers to go in front and behind.” [72:26-27]***

Notice the detail in the prophecy: a specific people, the Arab Bedouins of the region, were identified. The Prophet Muhammad could have easily played it safe by using more general language such as “you see competition in the construction of tall buildings...” which of course would be flexible enough to be applied to anyone in the world. Today we find in the Arabian Peninsula, the Arabs who used to be impoverished herders of camels and sheep are now competing to build the tallest tower blocks. Today, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, is the world’s tallest man-made structure at 828 m. A short time after it was finished a rival family in Saudi Arabia already announced that they would build a taller one (1000 m) – the Kingdom Tower – currently estimated to be completed in 2019. They are thus, literally competing with each other over who can build the tallest building:



Now what is remarkable is that up until only 50 or 60 years ago, the people of the region hardly had any houses at all. In fact, most of them were still Bedouins, living in tents. It was only the discovery of oil in the 20th century that led to the prosperity and transformation of the region. Were it not for oil, then chances are the region would still be the barren desert that it was at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an. If this were mere guess work on his part, then the discovery of oil would have been a massive stroke of luck. Moreover, if the Prophet Muhammad were merely guessing, would the author not have made more sense to relate this prophecy to the superpowers of his time, Rome and Persia, who (unlike the Arabs) already had a tendency to construct extravagant buildings and palaces?

v. Conquest of Persia.

One of the greatest hardships to befall the Prophet Muhammad was the Battle of the Trench. In the year 627 CE, a coalition army of Pagan Arab and Jewish tribes, numbering 10,000 men, attacked the Muslim city of Madinah. The Muslims were outnumbered three to one, and for two whole weeks they were under siege. The Qur'an vividly describes the dire situation faced by the Muslims:

They massed against you from above and below; your eyes rolled [with fear], your hearts rose into your throats, and you thought [ill]

thoughts of God. There the believers were sorely tested and deeply shaken. [33:10-11]

Shortly before the battle commenced, whilst the Muslims were digging a trench around the city of Madinah in preparation for the impending attack, when they were facing impossible odds and were staring certain defeat in the face, the Prophet Muhammad made a bold prediction:

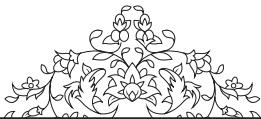
Al-Bara said: On the Day of Al-Khandaq (the trench) there stood out a rock too immune for our spades to break up. We therefore went to see God's Messenger for advice. He took the spade, and said: "In the Name of God" Then he struck it saying: "God is Most Great, I have been given the keys of Ash-Sham (Greater Syria). By God, I can see its red palaces at the moment;" on the second strike he said: "God is Most Great, I have been given Persia. By God, I can now see the white palace of Madain;" and for the third time he struck the rock saying: "In the Name of God," shattering the rest of the rock, and he said: "God is Most Great, I have been given the keys of Yemen. By God, I can see the gates of San'a while I am in my place." [24]

The Prophet Muhammad made the astonishing claim that the Muslims would not only take the lands of Yemen and Greater Syria, much of which was under the occupation of the Roman Empire, but that they would also defeat the mighty Persian Empire, one of the world's great superpowers. Within just a few decades of the Prophet Muhammad's death, all of these events came true. They were witnessed by the very companions of the Prophet Muhammad who had heard him make this prophecy. What are the odds that the Muslims, who were small in number and lacked economic, military and political strength, could topple the superpowers of the world in such a short space of time?

CONCLUSION

Comparing the prophecies found in the Qur'an and Hadith to the likes of Nostradamus, is like comparing night and day. As we have seen, the prophecies in the Qur'an and Hadith are clear. We have only looked at a handful of examples, but the Qur'an and Hadith are filled with many such prophecies about the future which have either been fulfilled, or are transpiring before our eyes today. Purely from probability, it is impossible to accurately guess such events, spanning multiple nations and different time periods, many of which were outside of the sphere of influence of Muslims, without making a single mistake. This is strong evidence that the author of the Qur'an, the One who inspired the Prophet Muhammad, has knowledge of the unseen.

It is also important to note that these prophecies are not present for the sake of entertainment; they have a noble purpose. For believers, they carry spiritual significance: many of them relate to signs of the coming Day of Judgement and so they serve as a reminder to Muslims that each fulfilled prophecy brings us one step closer to the momentous day when we will stand before our Creator. For non-believers, they are a sign, and represent evidence not only for the truthfulness of the Qur'an's claims of divine authorship, but also the inspiration of its messenger, Muhammad.



Reveals lost knowledge from history

As we have seen in the previous section, the Qur'an makes accurate predictions about the future. It is one thing to make claims about future events, but it is an entirely different matter to reveal hidden information about a past event, when the details have otherwise been lost in history. This is actually much more difficult to achieve: when you deal with history, you are dealing with something that has already happened and so you cannot influence the event.

Let us look at an example. Someone might make the claim that one day, a great king called Arthur will be born in a particular city. One hundred years later, that very prediction seems to come true - a prince is born in that exact city, his parents give him the name Arthur and he goes on to become a great king. Did the person who made the prediction have the power to see the future? Not necessarily, because this particular prediction can be explained in a number of ways, none of which require knowledge of the unseen. It could be down to pure probability: in every generation royal babies are born; therefore, given enough time, and enough princes, it is only a matter of time before a great king emerges. Another explanation could be that a baby prince was intentionally given the name Arthur, because his parents were aware of the prophecy and had hopes for him to become great. This is what is known as a "self-fulfilling prophecy", a prediction that directly or indirectly causes itself to become true. Now compare this scenario with a prediction about a past event.

Someone could say that the ancient king Arthur, a legendary king that we only hear about in stories, who was supposed to have lived hundreds of years ago and for whom no physical evidence exists, was buried in a particular location. If the royal tomb of a king were to then be discovered in that exact location, bearing the name Arthur, and having details that match the stories about him, then this would be far more difficult to achieve: unlike future prophecies, there is absolutely no way to influence a past event. Since this claim provided details not even known to Arthurian experts, then this would be better evidence for having knowledge of the unseen.

i. Pharaoh of Ancient Egypt.

The Qur'an reveals knowledge of Ancient Egypt that was lost to mankind for thousands of years. The Qur'an makes a historical claim about the titles of the leaders of Ancient Egypt, in particular the Egyptian word 'Pharaoh'. Advances in our understanding of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs have shown that the Qur'an's use of the term 'Pharaoh' is historically accurate.

The word 'Pharaoh' is a title that originates from the Egyptian term 'per-aa', literally "great house", describing the royal palace. Historically, however, "Pharaoh" only started being used as a title for the king much later in Egyptian history, during the New Kingdom period [25].

This is taken from the book ‘Egyptian Hieroglyphs’ published by the British Museum:

The ordinary word for king, already encountered above, is *nswt*, , often abbreviated to  . Here are some other common designations with their conventional translations:

	<i>hm</i>	'majesty'
	<i>ity</i>	'sovereign'
	<i>nb</i>	'lord'
	<i>pr- '3</i>	<u>'great house' (= 'Pharaoh', used from the New Kingdom on)</u>

Similarly, under the entry “Pharaoh”, the British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt confirms that it was first used to refer to the king in the New Kingdom Period:

*Pharaoh: Term used regularly by modern writers to refer to the Egyptian king. The word is the Greek form of the ancient Egyptian phrase *per-aa* ('the great house') which was originally used to refer to the royal palace rather than the king. The 'great house' was responsible for taxation of the lesser 'houses' (*perw*), such as the temple lands and private estates. It was only from the New Kingdom onwards (1550-1069 BC) that the term was used to refer to the king himself [26].*

A TIMELINE OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN HISTORY

Ancient Egyptian history is usually divided into periods roughly corresponding to the thirty Dynasties of kings listed by Manetho, an Egyptian chronicler of the 3rd century BCE, . I have summarised some of these dates below from Nicolas Grimal's *A History of Ancient Egypt* [27]:

Dynasties	Dates BCE, (approx.)	Period	Some Royal names associated with Period
3-6	2700-2200	Old Kingdom	Djoser, Snofru, Khufu (Cheops), Khafre (Chephren), Menkauhor, Teti, Pepy.
7-11	2200-2040	First Intermediate	Neferkare, Mentuhotpe, Inyotef
11 & 12	2040-1674	Middle Kingdom	Ammenemes, Sesosstris, Dedumesiu
13 - 17	1674-1553	Second Intermediate	Salitis, Yaqub-Har, Kamose, Seqenenre, Apophis
18 - 20	1552-1069	New Kingdom	Ahmose, Amenhotep (Amenophis), Tuthmose (Thuthmosis), Hatshepsut, Akhenaten (Amenophis IV), Tutankhamen, Horemheb, Seti (Sethos), Ramesses, Merenptah

DURING WHICH PERIODS DID JOSEPH AND MOSES LIVE IN EGYPT?

Professor Emeritus of Egyptology, Kenneth Kitchen, dates the story of Joseph entering Egypt to the Second Intermediate Period (1674 - 1553 BCE) [28]. The exodus of Moses from Egypt, however, is estimated by scholars to have taken place later in history. They place him within the New Kingdom period. According to the *Dictionary of Proper Names and Places in The Bible*: “**Moses’ career unfolds ca. 1250, the date generally accepted for the Exodus.**” [29] Similarly, the Encyclopaedia Judaica describes Moses as a: “**leader, prophet, and lawgiver (first half of the 13th century BCE).**”[30]

SUMMARY

The table below sums up the discussion concerning the use of “Pharaoh” in ancient Egypt and includes the times when Joseph and Moses entered Egypt:

Dynasties	Dates BCE (approx.)	Period	Patriarch
13 - 17	1674-1553	Second Intermediate	Jacob, Joseph
18 - 20	1552-1069	New Kingdom	“Pharaoh” first applied to the king around middle of the 14 th cent BCE, c. 1352-1348 BCE.
			Moses born around the beginning of the 13th century BCE.

THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an refers to Egyptian rulers throughout its chapters:

- ***The Qur'an uses the title "King" to refer to the ruler at the time of Joseph. He is never once labelled as Pharaoh.***
- ***The Qur'an repeatedly calls the ruler at the time of Moses, "Pharaoh". He is never called "King".***

So, the Qur'an's use of words respects what we know historically about the changing meaning of the word Pharaoh. Amazingly, these historical facts were unknown at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an in the 7th century: mankind's knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphs was then long lost. The only available source recording the religious past were Bible-based stories which were in circulation. Some critics of the Qur'an make the claim that its stories about the Prophets such as Moses and Joseph were copied from the Bible. But this cannot be the case: the Bible is less accurate as it uses the title "Pharaoh" to refer to the Egyptian ruler in the stories of Moses and Joseph.

It is only the Qur'an which has the correct historical understanding of Ancient Egypt. The Arab scholars Dhul-Nun al-Misri and Ibn Wahshiyya were some of the first historians to be able to partly translate what was written in the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs [31]. They lived over two hundred years after the Qur'an was revealed. It was not until the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, over 1,000 years after the revelation of the Qur'an, that the French Orientalist Jean-François Champollion was able to translate the hieroglyphs in 1822.

ii. The idolatry of Abraham's people.

Another example of the Qur'an showing insight into lost history can be found in the story of Abraham. The Prophet Abraham is a pivotal figure in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and while there is a

lot of overlap in the stories about Abraham in the Qur'an and Bible, there is a particular story that is only found in the Qur'an:

In this way We showed Abraham [God's] mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth, so that he might be a firm believer. When the night grew dark over him he saw a star and said, 'This is my Lord,' but when it set, he said, 'I do not like things that disappear.' And when he saw the moon rising he said, 'This is my Lord,' but when it too set, he said, If my Lord does not guide me, I shall be one of those who go astray.' Then he saw the sun rising and cried, 'This is my Lord! This is greater.' But when the sun set, he said, 'My people, I disown all that you worship beside God. I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth. I am not one of the polytheists.' [6:75-79]

We can see from this story how Abraham debated with his people, explaining to them the error of their way in worshipping false gods. We are taught an important principle by this story; we should only worship that which is worthy. Even though the Sun, Moon and stars are attractive, ultimately they are part of the creation which means they have a creator and therefore one that is more worthy of our worship than they are. It should be noted that the Bible makes no mention of this incident with Abraham, and provides no details about the specific type of idols that were worshipped by his people. Like the Biblical narrative, the Qur'an states that Abraham's people worshipped idols. However, unlike the Bible, the Qur'an goes into historical detail as it describes the type of idols that his people worshipped.

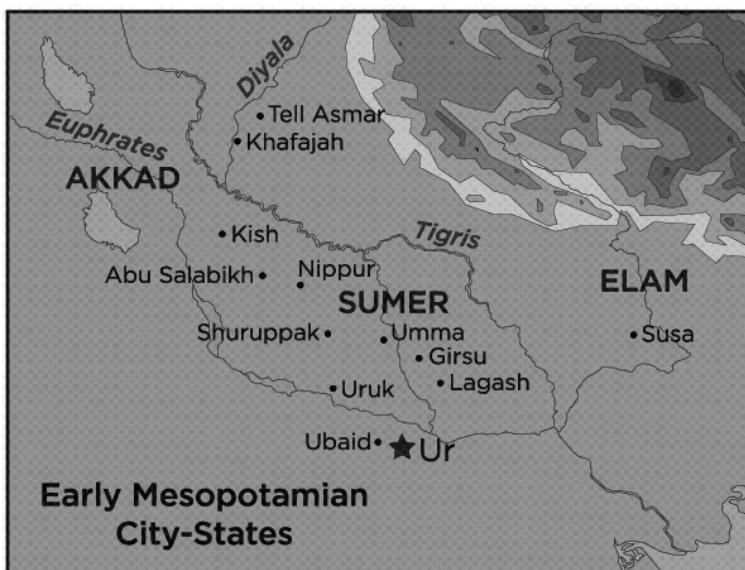
THE TYPE OF IDOLS WORSHIPPED ACCORDING TO THE QUR'AN

We have seen that along with mentioning the Sun and Moon as gods that were worshipped, the Qur'an also mentions a third idol. The original Arabic word in the verse which has been translated as star, "kawkab", generally means an object in the sky that is lit up. This includes stars and planets. Although it does not mention a specific star or planet's name, can we determine which heavenly body is being spoken of? There is strong evidence to suggest that the star/planet spoken of in the Qur'an is in fact, Venus. This can be concluded from the description that the Qur'an gives us in the story of Abraham: "***When the night grew dark over him he saw a star and said, 'This is my Lord,' but when it set, he said, 'I do not like things that disappear...***" Venus plays a very prominent role in the night sky. Venus is the brightest planet in the sky, but it is only visible shortly after sunset or before sunrise. Notice the words of the verse, "***I do not like things that disappear***". Venus is in fact, known as the "Morning Star" and "Evening Star" because it is visible for only a short amount of time just after sunset and again for a short amount of time just before sunrise. From the verse itself, we can see that the star disappeared just after nightfall. Also, it so happens that Venus is the third brightest object in the sky, after the Sun and Moon, sometimes appearing so bright that it can actually cast shadows on the ground on Earth. So even from a logical standpoint, if Abraham's people did worship heavenly bodies then they would surely worship the most prominent ones. Finally, we also find mention of Venus in the works of several classical scholars who wrote books explaining the meaning of the Qur'an. For example, the 14th century scholar Ismail ibn Kathir in his work Tafsir Ibn Kathir: "***Abraham, may God's peace and blessings be on him, first proved that Venus is not worthy of being worshipped...***" Also the 15th century scholar Jalal ad-Din al-Mahalli in his work Tafsir al-Jalalayn: "***When night descended, [when] it darkened, upon him he saw a star — said to have been Venus...***"

In summary, the Qur'an mentions that Abraham's people worshipped three heavenly bodies: the Moon, the Sun and Venus.

ABRAHAM'S BIRTHPLACE UNEARTHED BY ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS

Biblical historians generally date Abraham to 2100 BCE – 1900 BCE. His chronology is tied directly to the date of the Exodus of Moses. The two major proposals for the date of the Exodus are the 15th and 13th centuries BCE, hence the variation of the chronology of Abraham [32]. The oldest historical accounts we have for Abraham are found in the Bible. Biblical tradition places Abraham's birthplace to be a location called "Ur of the Chaldeans". Ur was an ancient city of Mesopotamia located in modern day Iraq:



Abraham's city of birth, Ur, was founded around 4000 BCE, and was the capital of the Sumerian civilisation and once a great harbour city on the banks of the Euphrates River. The city started to decline from around 550 BCE and was no longer inhabited after about 500 BCE. Eventually the city fell into ruin and the area was buried beneath the

desert sands [33]. Before the 20th century, written history had told the world very little about Ur. Beyond the Bible's brief references to it as the home of Abraham, almost nothing was known.

The British archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley conducted an excavation of the city of Ur in the early 20th century for the British Museum. He was forced to dig a vast hole over 40 feet deep to uncover the lowest levels of the city. His findings enabled scholars to trace the history of the city from its final days during the 4th century BCE, back to its prehistoric beginnings. Woolley's findings revealed much about everyday life, art, architecture, literature, government, and religion in what has come to be called "the cradle of civilization" [34].

Sir Leonard Woolley's excavations at Ur have been justly acclaimed for their invaluable archaeological discoveries: the royal cemetery, the Ur-Nammu ziggurat, and the innumerable artefacts of diverse types and categories, including thousands of cuneiform tablets and fragments from virtually all periods of Mesopotamian history from the 3rd millennium BCE onwards. Among these are more than eight hundred pieces inscribed with Sumerian literary texts which, despite the fragmentary and incomplete state of most of them, are of immense value for the recovery and restoration of a large number of Sumerian literary compositions [35]. As we are going to see, the ancient writings and artefacts discovered at Ur prove that Abraham's people worshipped celestial bodies.

UR'S WORSHIP OF THE MOON, SUN, AND VENUS

Since the end of the 3rd millennium, Mesopotamians observed the sky, thinking that what happens in the sky was reflected on the earth. Between the numerous heavenly bodies that cross the sky, the Moon, the Sun and Venus were the first and the most important ones that were identified as gods [36]. Among his many archaeological findings, Sir Leonard Woolley discovered that Ur was especially devoted to the worship of the Moon god Nanna.

Here is the Ziggurat of Ur, a giant complex built in around 2100 BCE, dedicated to the worship of Nanna, the principle deity of the city [37]:



The prominence of the Moon god Nanna is also reflected in literature discovered at Ur. Sir Leonard Woolley discovered clay tablets in a hoard in a house at Ur [38]. The texts deal with the construction of some object for Nanna by the King Iddin-Dagan (1975 BCE – 1954 BCE) which invoke Nanna as the “foremost one of the gods” to “put in order the ground plan of Ur”:

***The god Nanna, foremost one of the Anuna gods,
trusted one of the Ekur, whose mes [decrees of
the gods] embrace heaven and earth (and) are
those which no storm can disperse, the lord who
alone is a god, who shines forth, first-born son
of the god Enlil in order to restore the ancient
mes (and) to put in order the ground plan of Ur,
the princely son (Nanna) brought forth the best
mes from the Enkur. (Poem of Iddin-Dagan 1-12)***

The Moon god Nanna has been symbolically represented as a crescent since the end of the 3rd millennium BCE [39]. Here is the

cylinder seal of Hashamer, dated to around 2100 BCE. This relic depicts Ur-Nammu, the King of Ur, and the Moon god Nanna in the form of a crescent:



Archaeological excavations have found that the people of this region also worshipped additional gods and goddesses alongside the Moon, including the Sun. Tablets for the Code of Ur-Nammu were discovered at Ur and represent the oldest known law code surviving today, dated to 2100 BCE – 2050 BCE [40]. The prologue invokes the deities for Ur-Nammu's kingship, the Moon god Nanna and Sun god Utu, and decrees “equity in the land”:

Then did Ur-Nammu the mighty warrior, king of Ur, king of Sumer and Akkad, by the might of Nanna, lord of the city, and in accordance with the true word of Utu, establish equity in the land...

According to historians, Utu has been symbolically represented as the Sun since at least the late 3rd millennium BCE [41]. Here is the famous Stele of Ur-Nammu, dated to 2112 BCE – 2095 BCE. This relic is one the treasures of Mesopotamian art because it provides rare pictorial representations of the King of Ur's relations to the divine world. Very few pieces of sculpture have survived from

this period or from any early period of Mesopotamian history as most were smashed by invading enemies. It depicts the King of Ur and his priests engaged in sacrificial rituals to the Moon and Sun. The remains of this monument were excavated at Ur by the archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolly in the early 20th century [42]. You can see Nanna and the Sun god, Utu, joined together at the top in the form of a crescent and star (notice the rays emerging from the star):



Together with the Moon and Sun, the people of Ur also worshipped the planet Venus. This bronze figure represents Ur-Nammu, the

ruler of Ur. It is from Uruk, southern Iraq, Third Dynasty of Ur, 2100 BCE – 2000 BCE. The inscription around and over the king's body states that Ur-Nammu dedicated the figure to the goddess Inanna [43]:



Inanna is personified as the planet Venus throughout Mesopotamian literature, at least since the beginning of the second millennium BCE, and perhaps even as far back as the third millennium BCE [44].

We can see this in the writings of Enheduanna (2285 BCE – 2250 BCE), a high priestess of the Moon god Nanna in the city of Ur [45]. She became the most important religious figure of her day, and her evocative prayers, stories, and incantations, which were devoted to the goddess Inanna, were highly influential [46]

Although she was the priestess of Nanna, Enheduanna's most famous work is her Nin-me-sharra, or "Exaltation of Inanna". She refers to Inanna as "great lady of the horizon and zenith of the heavens", an allusion to her astral aspect as the planet Venus:

Most precious lady, beloved by An, your holy heart is great; may it be assuaged on my behalf! Beloved spouse of Ušumgal-ana, you are the great lady of the horizon and zenith of the heavens. The Anuna have submitted to you. From birth you were the junior queen: how supreme you are now over the Anuna, the great gods! The Anuna kiss the ground with their lips before you... My lady beloved of An, may your heart be calmed towards me, the brilliant en priestess of Nanna! (Nin-me-sharra 109-121)

In fact, some Sumerian hymns are much more explicit about Inanna's connection with Venus. For example, in a poem of praise to Inanna and the King Iddin-Dagan (1975 BCE – 1954 BCE), she is invoked as the planet Venus:

To the great [lady] of heaven, Inanna, I would say: 'Hail! To the holy torch who fills the heaven, to the light, to her who shines like daylight... Of the holy torch who fills the heaven, of her stance in heaven, like the moon and the sun... In heaven she surely stands, the good wild cow of An... With An she takes her seat upon the great throne... Upon them my lady looks in a friendly way from the midst of heaven... At

evening, the radiant star, the great light which fills the heaven... She comes forth like the moon at night. She comes forth like bright daylight in the heat of noon... The lady, the amazement of the land, the solitary star, the Venus-star... [47]

Here, as so often in Mesopotamian literature, Inanna is referred to as Venus and is said to stand alongside the celestial gods of the Moon and the Sun.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MOON, SUN, AND VENUS

In fact, these three deities – the Moon, the Sun and Venus – were believed to be genealogically related to each other and formed a triad. According to Sumerian mythology, the goddess of Venus Inanna and the Sun god Utu were siblings and both the offspring of the Moon god Nanna [48].

This relationship between the Moon (Nanna), Sun (Utu) and Venus (Inanna) is reflected throughout Sumerian literature. For example, “Inanna and Ebih” is another famous composition by the high priestess of Ur, Enheduanna, depicting Inanna as the daughter of Sin/Suen: **“For destroying Ebih, great child of Suen, maid-en Inana, be praised.” (Inanna and Ebih 182-183)**

According to historians, the name Sin/Suen is the Akkadian equivalent of the Sumerian Nanna. The earliest writings of both names are roughly contemporary, and occur interchangeably [49].

Here Enheduanna calls on both Sin/Suen and Inanna for help because she has been dislodged from her position by a rebelling Sumerian king, Lugal-Ane, who, she complains, did not show proper respect for the gods and has desecrated a temple at Uruk:

***Sin, tell An about Lugal-ane and my fate!...
En-hedu-ana will recite a prayer to you. To you,***

holy Inanna I shall give free vent to my tears like sweet beer!... Lugal-anne has altered everything and has stripped An of the E-ana (temple). He has not stood in awe of the greatest deity. He has turned that temple, whose attractions were inexhaustible, whose beauty was endless, into a desolation. (Nin-me-sharra 74-90)

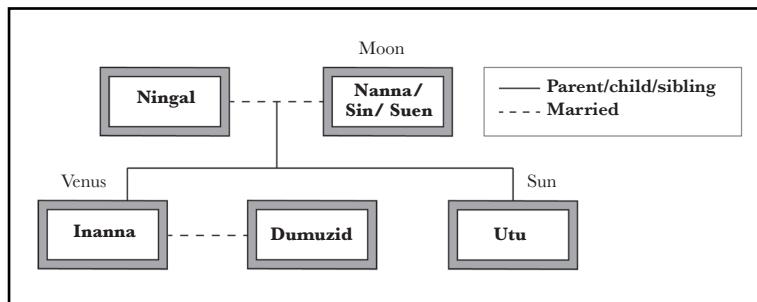
Nanna, Ningal (Nanna's wife), Utu and Inanna are mentioned together in a clay tablet discovered by Sir Leonard Woolley at Ur [50]. The text invokes these gods and goddesses as part of a curse:

Whether he be a king, an en priest, or an ordinary human being, may that man not get a name or beget any descendants. May the god Nanna, my lord, (and) the goddess Ningal, my lady, curse him, (and) may the god Utu and the goddess Inanna forever be its (the curse's) evil spirit who cannot be countermanded. (Poem of Iddin-Dagan 32-41)

The composition “Inanna’s descent into underworld” was excavated at Nippur. It is dated to the first half of the second millennium (2000 BCE – 1500 BCE). It mentions Inanna’s relation to her brother, the Sun god Utu, through her husband, Dumuzid, who is Utu’s brother in law:

Dumuzid let out a wail and turned very pale. The lad raised his hands to heaven, to Utu: “Utu, you are my brother-in-law. I am your relation by marriage. I brought butter to your mother’s house. I brought milk to Ningal’s house. Turn my hands into snake’s hands and turn my feet into snake’s feet, so I can escape my demons, let them not keep hold of me.” (Inanna’s descent into underworld 368-375)

Based on these Sumerian writings, it is possible to depict the relationship between the Moon, Sun and Venus in a diagram:



HOW COULD SUCH KNOWLEDGE BE IN THE QUR'AN

Knowledge of Sumerian religion (including the birthplace of Abraham, the city of Ur) had been lost for thousands of years until their re-discovery and excavation, starting in the 19th century. Much of this knowledge was recorded in ancient artefacts and literary works, a number of which we have examined, in the language of Sumerian. This language was spoken at the time of Abraham and continued to be used as a sacred, ceremonial, literary and scientific language in Mesopotamia until the first century CE [51]. It was then forgotten until the mid-19th century, when Assyriologists such as George Smith (1840 CE – 1876 CE) and Henry Rawlinson (1810 CE – 1895 CE) began deciphering the excavated inscriptions and tablets and translated them into English.

Yet we find such lost knowledge in the historical claims that have been mentioned in the Qur'an about the deities worshipped by Abraham's people – the triad of the Moon, Sun and Venus – are remarkably accurate. The only source of knowledge about Abraham that would be readily available to Muhammad in the 7th century would have been the Bible-based stories and Jewish legends in circulation. However, the story of the Prophet Abraham in the Bible is silent on the details of the religious beliefs of his people. Regarding the Jewish legends that pre-date the Qur'an, the Rabbi Louis Ginz-

berg identified six different versions of stories about Abraham that are similar to the Qur'anic narrative [52].

Although these bear some resemblance, they are in fact, much more general in nature and they do not contain the same level of detail that is present in the Qur'an. For example, one of the stories found in Jewish legend is that Abraham observed the sky in order to find a sign that would foretell the rains for the year. While doing so, he had a spiritual experience:

And he was sitting alone making observations and a voice came into his heart saying, “All the signs of the stars and the signs of the sun and the moon are all under the Lord’s control. Why am I seeking [them out]?” If He wishes, He will make it rain morning and evening, and if He desires He will not make it fall, for everything under His control.” [53]

Notice that the Jewish legend only provides a general description of “stars”; it lacks the level of detail that is found in the Qur'an which, as we have seen, pinpoints the specific planet Venus. In another Jewish legend, Abraham mentions the elements of fire, water and earth alongside the Sun, Moon and stars as gods that are worshipped by his people:

Behold, the fire is more worthy of honour than all things formed because even that which is not subjected is subjected unto it, and things easily perishable are mocked by its flames. But even more worthy of honour is the water, because it conquereth the fire and satisfieth the earth. But even it I do not call God, because it is subjected to the earth under which the water inclineth. But I call the earth much more worthy of honour, because it overpowereith the nature (and the fulness) of the water. Even it [the

earth], however, I do not call God, [because] it, too, is dried up by the sun, [and] is apportioned to man to be tilled. [I call the sun more worthy of honour than the earth,] because it with its rays illumineth the whole world and the different atmospheres. [But] even it I do not call God, because at night and by clouds its course is obscured. Nor, again, do I call the moon or the stars God, because they also in their season obscure [their] light at night. [54]

Nowhere does the Qur'an mention that Abraham's people worshipped the elements fire, water and earth. Now, if the Qur'an were copying from Jewish legend, then it would have included the mention of these elements. We can see from these examples that Jewish legends were not used as sources by Muhammad.

Finally, critics may claim that the author of the Qur'an merely luckily guessed the gods and goddesses that were worshipped by Abraham's people. This is highly unlikely given the fact that the people across this region worshipped thousands of deities. In the second millennium BCE, when Mesopotamian scribes conducted a divine census, listing the gods of various Mesopotamian cities, they came up with nearly 2,000 names [55]. They had gods for everything from brick making to brewing, even including a Lord of Livestock Pens [56]. In addition, the manifestations of Mesopotamian deities were often quite complex, as they displayed contradictory, even paradoxical traits [57]. Their descriptions and iconography varied significantly depending on the particular geographical region and period of Mesopotamian history. For example, we have seen that Inanna was worshipped as "the queen of heaven", symbolised as the planet Venus. But she was also seen as the goddess of love, symbolised in human form as a naked woman, and even the goddess of war, symbolised as a lion. In the light of this constant evolution of Mesopotamian gods and goddesses, for the Qur'an to pin down Venus as a goddess worshipped in a specific part of Mesopotamia, the city of Ur, in a specific part of history, at the time of Abraham in the second

millennium BCE, is remarkable and makes a lucky guess ever more highly improbable.

CONCLUSION

The Qur'an is filled with stories about past nations. It wants us to reflect on history which facilitates humility and discourages arrogance of one's own civilisation. Power comes and goes, and we must be humble as we will not last forever. Another benefit of focusing on history is that we learn from the mistakes of others. We have looked at the examples of Moses and Abraham and how in discussing these stories, the Qur'an demonstrates an accurate insight into lost history. The Qur'an proclaims that it reveals knowledge of the unseen: "***That is from the news of the unseen which We reveal to you, [O Muhammad]. You knew it not, neither you nor your people before this.***" [11:49] The author of the Qur'an consistently demonstrates knowledge of the unseen, of different times and places in history. This is not a quality of human beings but rather God [58].



Cannot be imitated

The Qur'an issues forth a challenge to mankind: "***If you have doubts about the revelation We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a single chapter like it...***" [2:23]

Perhaps the greatest miracle of the Qur'an is that it cannot be imitated. This divine challenge has remained undefeated for over 1,400 years. The Qur'an makes the bold claim that it is impossible for any human being to produce just one chapter like it, even if we were to all help one another in the effort: "***Say, 'Even if all mankind and jinn [spirits] came together to produce something like this Qur'an, they could not produce anything like it, however, much they helped each other.'***" [17:88]

Perhaps the best way to begin to appreciate the magnitude of this challenge is to use an analogy. In the field of painting, the artist Leonardo da Vinci is widely considered to be the greatest artist of all time. One of his masterpieces, the Mona Lisa, is widely considered to be the greatest of all paintings. Now imagine if you were given the challenge of producing such a painting. Not only must you produce a work which excels that of the Mona Lisa, but you must do this on your first public attempt. Moreover, it must be recognised by art historians to be better than any other artwork ever produced. Furthermore, it must be future-proof: it cannot be bettered by anyone else. As we are going to see, in the field of Arabic literature, this is similar to the Qur'an.

THE NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE

According to classical scholars of the Qur'an, these verses daringly call for the linguistic and literary experts of any era to imitate the Qur'an's linguistic and literary features [59]. The tools needed to meet this challenge are the finite grammatical rules and the twenty eight letters of the Arabic alphabet. These are independent and objective measures available to all.

So then, what exactly does meeting the challenge involve? A lot of people misunderstand the Qur'an's challenge to produce something like it; many assume it simply means writing something as "good" as the Qur'an. Because of this, many sceptics point out that literary value judgments are highly subjective. This is a fair point to make. If someone says that they think a certain selection of prose or poetry is better than the Qur'an, who can argue with them? After all, is it not really just a matter of personal preference and taste?

The Qur'an's challenge, however, is not simply to write something of equal literary merit. Rather, what is required, is to achieve at least a comparable degree of literary merit whilst replicating the Qur'an's particular style. It is possible to superficially copy the style of the Qur'an, but all such attempts from the days of the Prophet Muhammad to the present have proven to be inadequate in terms of literary excellence.

It is also possible for a person writing in Arabic to reach a great level of literary excellence and, in the most moving of poetry and prose, convey the noblest thoughts and sentiments – but nobody else has ever done so using the Qur'an's unique style. The Qur'an is so unique that it created an entirely new genre of Arabic literature whilst at the same time being internally consistent in maintaining its unique style. Respected British Orientalist Arthur J Arberry states:

"For the Koran is neither prose nor poetry, but a unique fusion of both." [60]

This, then, is the acid test: write something in the exact same style as the Qur'an and, in doing so, produce something of arguably similar

literary quality. How can we evaluate the results? This brings us onto the second part of the challenge: one must bring their witnesses, experts in the field of Arabic literature, to attest to the quality of the work, and not just make an unattested claim: “**...then produce a single chapter like it—enlist whatever witnesses you have other than God—if you truly [think you can].**” [2:23]

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A challenge only has substance if there are individuals capable of mounting a response. This is why it is crucial to note the historical context in which the Qur'an emerged. The Arabs at the time considered themselves, and are still considered by historians and linguists to this day, the masters of the Arabic language.

The following quotation from the 11th century poet, Ibn Rashiq, illustrates the importance attached to language at the time. He writes:

Whenever a poet emerged in an Arab tribe, other tribes would come to congratulate, feasts would be prepared, the women would join together on lutes as they do at weddings, and old and young men would all rejoice at the good news. The Arabs used to congratulate each other only on the birth of a child and when a poet rose among them. [61]

The 9th century scholar Ibn Qutaiba defined poetry as the Arabs saw it: “**the mine of knowledge of the Arabs, the book of their wisdom, the truthful witness on the day of dispute, the final proof at the time of argument.**” [62]

Ibn Khaldun, a notable scholar of the 14th century, remarked on the importance of poetry in Arab life:

It should be known that Arabs thought highly of poetry as a form of speech. Therefore, they made

it the archives of their history, the evidence for what they considered right and wrong, and the principal basis of reference for most of their sciences and wisdom. [63]

Navid Kermani, a writer and expert in Islamic studies, explains the extent to which the Arabs had to study to master the Arabic language. He suggests that a 7th century Arab lived in a world that almost worshipped poetry:

Old Arabic poetry is a highly complex phenomenon. The vocabulary, grammatical idiosyncrasies and strict norms were passed down from generation to generation, and only the most gifted students fully mastered the language. A person had to study for years, sometimes even decades under a master poet before laying claim to the title of poet. Muhammad grew up in a world which almost religiously revered poetic expression. [64]

In the light of the above quotations, the 7th century Arabs were best placed to challenge the Qur'an: they had reached the peak of eloquence and the pinnacle of linguistic mastery. As we will see, they collectively failed to produce an Arabic text that matched the Qur'an's linguistic and literary features.

WHAT SCHOLARS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THE UNRIVALLED QUR'AN

There have been a multitude of scholars from western, eastern, religious and non-religious backgrounds who have testified to the Qur'an's uniqueness. Below is a list of some of the scholars that say that the Qur'an cannot be imitated:

Professor of Oriental Studies Martin Zammit claims that: "**Notwithstanding the literary excellence of some of the long pre-Islamic poems...the Qur'an is definitely on a level of**

its own as the most eminent written manifestation of the Arabic language.” [65]

The linguistics' expert Professor Hussein Abdul-Raof asserts that: “*The Arabs, at the time, had reached their linguistic peak in terms of linguistic competence and sciences, rhetoric, oratory, and poetry. No one, however, has ever been able to provide a single chapter similar to that of the Qur'an.” [66]*

During an interview with Angelika Neuwirth, the distinguished Professor of Qur'anic studies, she argued that the Qur'an has never been successfully challenged by anyone, past or present:

No one has succeeded, this is right...I really think that the Qur'an has even brought Western researchers embarrassment, who were not able to clarify how suddenly in an environment where there were not any appreciable written text, appeared the Qur'an with its richness of ideas and its magnificent wordings. [67]

In his translation of the Qur'an, N J Dawood, a Jewish Scholar, describes it as a ‘literary masterpiece’:

The Koran is the earliest and by far the finest work of Classical Arabic prose... It is acknowledged that the Koran is not only one of the most influential books of prophetic literature but also a literary masterpiece in its own right.” [68]

French scholar Paul Casanova marvels at the language of the Qur'an:

Whenever Muhammad was asked a miracle, as a proof of the authenticity of his mission, he quoted the composition of the Qur'an and its incomparable excellence as proof of its

divine origin. And, in fact, even for those who are non-Muslims nothing is more marvellous than its language with such apprehensible plenitude and a grasping sonority... The ampleness of its syllables with a grandiose cadence and with a remarkable rhythm have been of much momentum in the conversion of the most hostile and the most sceptic. [69]

Labid Ibn Rabi'ah, one of the famous poets of the Seven Odes, embraced Islam, due to the inimitability of the Qur'an. Once he embraced Islam he stopped composing poetry, people were surprised for "**he was their most distinguished poet**" [70]. They asked him why he stopped composing poetry; he replied, "**What! Even after the revelation of the Qur'an?**" [71]

Finally, the highly acclaimed Professor and Arabist Hamilton Gibb states that:

If the Qur'an were his [Muhammad's] own composition other men could rival it. Let them produce ten verses like it. If they could not (and it is obvious that they could not) then let them accept the Qur'an as an outstanding evidential miracle. [72]

ADDRESSING SCHOLARLY CONTENTIONS

An example of a scholarly contention can be found in the work of the highly acclaimed German orientalist and scholar Thedor Nöldeke. Nöldeke was an academic critic of the linguistic and literary features of the Qur'an, and rejected the Qur'an's claims that it cannot be imitated. For instance, Nöldeke remarks that: "**the grammatical persons change from time to time in the Qur'an in an unusual and not beautiful way.**" [73]

However, his criticism actually brings to light the weakness of such contentions. The Qur'anic linguistic feature that Nöldeke refers to

is actually the effective rhetorical Arabic device known as “iltifat” - grammatical shifts. This literary device enhances the text’s literary expression. It is an accepted, well researched part of Arabic rhetoric [74]. One can find references in the books of Arabic rhetoric by al-Athir, Suyuti and Zarkashi [75].

The main functions of these shifts include a shift in emphasis to alert the reader to a particular matter, and to enhance the style of the text [76]. Its effects include creating variation and difference in a text, to generate rhythm and flow, and to maintain the listener’s attention in a dramatic way [77]. Examples of grammatical shifts include: changes in person, change in number, change in addressee, change in tense and using a noun in place of a pronoun [78].

The 108th chapter of the Qur'an, al-Kawthar, “The Abundance”, provides a good example of the use of these grammatical shifts:

***“Indeed, We have granted you, [O Muhammad],
al-Kawthar (the abundance).***

***So pray to your Lord and sacrifice
[to Him alone].***

***Indeed, your enemy is the one cut off.”
[Chapter 108]***

In this chapter, there is a change from the first person plural “We” to the second person “your Lord”. This change is not an abrupt shift; it is calculated and highlights the intimate relationship between God and the Prophet Muhammad. The use of “We” is used to emphasise the majesty, power and ability of God. This choice of personal pronoun calls attention to, and stresses the fact, that God has the power and ability to grant Muhammad “the abundance”. “Your Lord” has been used to indicate and emphasise intimacy, closeness and love. The words “Your Lord” have a range of meanings which imply master, provider, and the One who cares. This is an apt use of language, as the surrounding concepts are about prayer,

sacrifice and worship: “***Therefore turn in prayer to your Lord and sacrifice***”. Furthermore, the purpose of this chapter is also to console the Prophet Muhammad: the use of such intimate language is comforting.

Theodor Nöldeke’s criticism of the Qur’ān was not only a personal value judgement, but also exposed his limited understanding of the classical Arabic language. These grammatical shifts contribute to the dynamic style of the Qur’ān. They are obvious stylistic features and are an accepted rhetorical practice. The Qur’ān uses this feature in such a way that conforms to the theme of the text, while enhancing the impact of the message it conveys. It is not surprising that Professor Neal Robinson, in his book *Discovering the Qur’ān: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, concludes that the grammatical shifts used in the Qur’ān “***are a very effective rhetorical device.***” [79]

CONCLUSION

The Qur’ān is the peak of Arabic eloquence. The Qur’ān stakes its claim to its divine origin by highlighting its language, when it issues the challenge for man to rival even its shortest chapter. Surely a human being with equal or greater literary ability to the author of the Qur’ān should be able to produce a similar chapter. Since the revelation of the Qur’ān, over 1,400 years ago, many have tried and failed to meet this challenge. This is in spite of having the very blueprint, the Qur’ān itself, to follow. If the Qur’ān’s style cannot be imitated by any human, we should thus reflect on its origins.



Life of the Prophet Muhammad

This book has so far examined some compelling intellectual reasons to believe that the Qur'an is from God. We must not forget, however, that the main purpose for the revelation of the Qur'an is guidance for humanity: "***This is a Scripture which We have sent down to you [Prophet] so that, with their Lord's permission, you may bring people from the depths of darkness into light...***" [**14:1**]. The best example to look to for the fruits of Qur'anic guidance is none other than the life of the Prophet Muhammad. He embodied the morals and teachings of the Qur'an to the extent that when his wife was asked about his manners she remarked, "***Do you read the Qur'an? His manners were the Qur'an.***" [**80**]. It is very difficult to try and do justice to this great personality in a book such as this when entire volumes have been written about his character. Here are just a few examples of what makes the Prophet Muhammad such an outstanding role model for humanity:

i. Humility.

***"God does not love arrogant or boastful people."* [31:18]**

When you think of kings and leaders, what images come to your mind? Status and power is usually associated with exquisite food, fancy clothing and monumental palaces. When it comes to the Prophet Muhammad however, such a picture could not be further from the truth. Throughout his 23 years of Prophethood, Muhammad led a

very simple and humble lifestyle. Sahl ibn Sa'ad, one of Muhammad's companions, said with regards to his diet, "***The Prophet of God did not see bread made from fine flour from the time God sent him (as a Prophet) until he died.***" [81]

He did not like to be wasteful; there was never any surplus food in his house [82]. He emphasised the feeding of the poor and one's neighbours, even saying that "***He is not a believer whose stomach is filled while his neighbour goes hungry***" [83].

The Prophet would never complain about the food that was brought to him, and he accepted and attended invitations where bread made of barley and rancid fat a few days old was served [84]. His living quarters were similarly modest. There is a narration by his companion Umar ibn Al-Khattab which gives a description of what he saw when he went to visit the Prophet in his living quarters. Umar saw that the Prophet was lying on a mat which was made out of the leaves of the date-palm tree; his head was placed on a leather pillow stuffed with the bark of the date-palm tree. When the Prophet got up to greet him, Umar saw that the tough texture of his bedding had left marks on his sides. This moved Umar to tears, upon which the Prophet asked him what makes him weep. Umar stated that the kings of Rome and Persia lived in luxury and that since he is the Prophet of God he deserves better. The Prophet responded by saying that they should be happy that others may have this worldly life but that they have the afterlife [85].

Despite Muhammad's responsibilities as a Prophet, teacher, statesman and judge, he still used to milk his goat [86], mend his clothes, repair his shoes and help his family with the household work [87]. Some people are forced to live simple and humble lifestyles because they have no other choice due to their circumstances. Muhammad lived this simple life until he died, in spite of the fact that the Muslim treasury was at his disposal and the greater part of the Arabian Peninsula was Muslim before he died. He had very few material possessions and he did not make any arrangements for special treatment for his own family upon his death. When he died, he left very little wealth behind, and what he did have was given to charity:

Amr Ibn Al-Hareth, one of Muhammad's companions, said that when the Prophet died, he left neither money nor anything else except his white riding mule, his arms, and a piece of land which he left to charity. [88]

The Prophet Muhammad's life and death were what we would expect from someone who was not motivated by materialism but rather had his sight firmly set on the hereafter. It is important to point out that his example does not mean that eating nice food or trying to acquire nice things is wrong. The Prophet Muhammad taught that believers should be generous to their guests, should wear their best clothes on days of celebration and strive for excellence in all walks of life. Some of his greatest companions, such as Abu Bakr and Abdur Rahman Ibn Awf, were very wealthy, successful businessmen. The lesson that we should take from his simple and humble lifestyle is that we should not allow material things to make us lose sight of the hereafter as this world is transient and the hereafter is eternal.

Some sceptics might argue that Muhammad endured such harsh living conditions in order to achieve an end goal of power and domination over Arabia. This cannot be the case, as early on in his mission when the Muslims were in a position of weakness, those who opposed him offered him power and kingship in order to try and persuade him to stop preaching against their worship of idols:

"If you desire money and wealth by preaching what you are preaching, we will collect enough for you from our own. We will make you the wealthiest of all of us. If it is chieftainship that you desire, we are ready to make you our paramount chief, so that we will never decide on a matter without you. If you desire rulership, we will make you our ruler..." [89]

This incident demonstrates that Muhammad was not motivated by money or power, but rather he was sincere about the message he was preaching.

ii. Equality of human beings.

“O mankind, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognise one another. In God’s eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware.” [49:13]

The Qur'an speaks here of human equality in no uncertain terms. Islam rejects the notion that certain individuals or nations are favoured because of their wealth, power or race. God created human beings as equals who are to be distinguished from each other only on the basis of their faith and piety. The life of the Prophet Muhammad is a beautiful realisation of this Qur'anic standard. Throughout his Prophethood, Muhammad advised his people to set aside their ignorant and perverse values and to live by the Qur'an. The Prophet Muhammad's love for humanity, irrespective of race or nationality, is demonstrated in his famous Last Sermon. In perhaps the most noteworthy manifestation of anti-racism of any religious figurehead in recorded history, he challenged an ultra-nationalistic and highly racist society by calling on people to unite under a banner of humanity:

“O People, lend me an attentive ear, for I know not whether after this year, I shall ever be amongst you again. Therefore listen to what I am saying to you very carefully and take these words to those who could not be present here today... All of mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black, nor does a black have any superiority over a white, except by piety and good action.” [90]

The Prophet's anti-racist mentality helped lead his people out of the darkness of nationalism and racism and into the light by guiding them onto the path of racial equality. The fact that Islam spread amongst all the colours and races of the world is testimony to the fact that Islam did not accept these false divisions. Today, millions of people across the world, black, white, Asian, African and European are all part of the unique Islamic brotherhood.

The Prophet Muhammad's anti-racist views were apparent very early on in his Prophetic mission through his friendship with Bilal ibn Rabah, a black slave who rose to a leading position within the Muslim community of 7th century Arabia. He was appointed as the official muadhin of the Prophet, meaning that he was responsible for making the public calls to prayer. In choosing Bilal for this honourable role, Muhammad demonstrated that social exclusion and subordination based upon skin colour was not to be permitted in an Islamic society. The Prophet Muhammad broke down racial barriers for black believers in a part of the world that had one of the poorest track records for human rights, preceding the Western civil rights movement and Martin Luther King by nearly 1,500 years. It is no wonder that British historian Professor Arnold J. Toynbee wrote, ***"The extinction of race consciousness as between Muslims is one of the outstanding moral achievements of Islam, and in the contemporary world there is, as it happens, a crying need for the propagation of this Islamic virtue."*** [91]

Throughout his Prophetic mission, Muhammad and his followers encountered and lived among many different communities. For nearly a decade, Muslims, Jews, Christians and pagans were all living together in the city of Madinah. The Prophet Muhammad united people of different faiths and secured social cohesion by making social agreements. In order to grant full rights to different religious minorities living in Madinah, the Prophet initiated a historic charter which put in place measures to prevent bloodshed among the different tribes. Moreover, minorities were granted not only social and religious freedom but also judicial power to decide their own civil matters. Allowing the establishment of independent

judiciary systems free from external interference guaranteed the protection of the interests of citizens and secured justice for all regardless of religion. The Prophet warned Muslims against abusing or oppressing those of other faiths who lived among them by saying, ***“Beware! Whoever is cruel and hard on a non-Muslim minority, curtails their rights, burdens them with more than they can bear, or takes anything from them against their free will; I will complain against the person on the Day of Judgment.”*** [92] These basic guidelines set out by the Prophet Muhammad form a blueprint of how Muslims should deal with people of other faiths and were based on the concept of justice laid out in the Qur'an:

“You who believe, uphold justice and bear witness to God, even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or your close relatives. Whether the person is rich or poor, God can best take care of both. Refrain from following your own desire, so that you can act justly— if you distort or neglect justice, God is fully aware of what you do.” [4:135]

iii. Mercy and forgiveness.

“Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better...” [41:34]

Muhammad was born and raised in 7th century Makkah, a city of the Arabian Peninsula. At the time, the vast majority of Makkans were polytheistic in religion. Then, in 610 CE, God appointed Muhammad as His Prophet at the age of around forty. He began to call his people to a new, monotheistic religion. Initially, Muhammad preached in private, and his early followers congregated in secret. When Muhammad eventually declared his message publicly, he and his early followers were met with increasing hostility. His mission to reform society, which included the call for his people to renounce idolatry and advocating for the rights of the poor and weak, inevitably put him on a collision course with the rich and powerful tribes of Makkah.

The leaders of Makkah instigated a sustained campaign of violence against what they saw as a rival faith and a threat to their power structure. For over a decade, Muslims would go on to suffer severe persecution; they endured beatings, torture, imprisonment and some were even killed. The leaders of Makkah even signed a pact resulting in the complete social and economic boycott of Muslims along with the tribes associated with them. Muhammad and his followers were forced by circumstance to leave their homes and resettle in the outskirts of Makkah. Confined to the harsh and barren desert valley, they struggled to survive for three years, with even food and medicine being barred to them. During what is known as the Year of Grief, Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib passed away. Abu Lahab, early Islam's arch-enemy and Muhammad's bitterest foe, replaced Abu Talib as the chief of the tribe. The persecution of the early Muslim community in Makkah intensified and in 622 CE, after suffering for nearly a decade, and a half, the Prophet Muhammad and his followers fled their home city of Makkah in order to escape persecution. They had to leave behind their possessions and properties which were confiscated by their enemies.

They arrived safely in the city of Madinah. There, the early Muslim community regrouped and eventually flourished. The persecution by their enemies had by no means come to an end, as over the next ten years the tribes of Makkah fought numerous wars against the Muslims. In 629 CE, the Makkans broke a mutual peace treaty with the Muslims. The Prophet Muhammad then led a Muslim army of ten thousand in a triumphant return to their home city of Makkah, nearly a decade, after they had been forced to flee it. This historic event is known as the Conquest of Makkah. Before ordering the troops to enter Makkah, the Prophet instructed his men to lift their hands only against those who drew swords against them. He also directed them neither to lay their hands on any moveable or immovable property of the Makkans, nor to destroy anything [93].

The Muslim army entered the city peacefully. No house was robbed; no man or woman was harmed or even insulted. The Prophet then went before the defeated people whose hearts were trembling,

waiting to see what the victorious conqueror would do with them. The Makkans were afraid because the Arabs had lived by the law of retaliation; their own practice was that of revenge and murder. Many of them were expecting some sort of punishment in accordance with the traditions of the Arabs, and Muhammad had the power to exact that punishment. But instead, the Prophet granted a general amnesty to the entire population of Makkah, saying to them, "***What do you suppose I should do with you?***" ***They replied, "What is good. You are a generous brother and the son of a generous brother."*** ***The Messenger of God replied, "Go, for you are free."*** [94] Muhammad could have taken vengeance against all those who had persecuted him and his people for so many years, but instead he forgave them, reciting the following verse of the Qur'an: "***There is no censure on you on this day. May God forgive you, for He is the Most Merciful of the merciful.***" [12:92] [95]. The Prophet Muhammad never took revenge on anyone for personal reasons and forgave even his firm enemies. It is one thing to forgive others when you are in a position of weakness and have no choice, but it is very difficult to do so when you find yourself in a position of strength over your staunch enemies and brutal oppressors. This is one of the many beautiful qualities of the Prophet Muhammad that changed the hatred in the hearts of his enemies towards love for him.

From a historical perspective, it would not have been unusual for a bloody conquest, such was the behaviour of conquering kings and armies of the times. Six hundred years later, when a Mongol army conquered Baghdad, then the capital of Muslim lands, a full week of pillaging and destruction commenced. The Mongols destroyed palaces, hospitals and libraries. The Grand Library of Baghdad, containing countless precious historical documents and books on subjects ranging from medicine to astronomy, was destroyed. History records that the waters of the Tigris River ran black with ink from the enormous quantities of books flung into it. Citizens attempted to flee, but were intercepted by Mongol soldiers who killed in abundance, sparing neither women nor children. It is estimated that close to 90,000 people died [96]. Although the mercy of the Prophet

Muhammad is a rare example in a human history that is littered with bloody conquests, we should not at all be surprised by his conduct as he was a living embodiment of the Qur'anic teachings of mercy and forgiveness that lie at the heart of its message.

iv. Patience and gentleness.

“Indeed, God is with the patient.” [2:153]

Many of the examples we have looked at so far have been in the public domain. The best way to judge a person's character is by their treatment of their inner circle. It is easy to be a nice person under the watchful eye of the public but your true self is shown by your treatment of your family and those who are under your care. From this perspective perhaps the person best placed to give an assessment of the character of the Prophet Muhammad was Anas ibn Malik. Anas ibn Malik entered into the household of the Prophet as a young child: ***“I served the Prophet for ten years, I lived with him for ten years and not once did he rebuke me. Not once did the word ‘uff’ come from his mouth. He never said to me, ‘why did you do this?’ or ‘why did not you do that?” [97]*** Anas narrates that he served the Prophet for ten years. He was with him day in and day out, both when the Prophet travelled and when he was at home. The word “uff” is the Arabic equivalent to English expressions of annoyance such as “argh” or “ugh”. Here, Anas is saying that for ten years, he never even once heard the Prophet utter “ugh”, which is not even a word of anger; it is the smallest expression that one can make when they feel annoyed or impatient. Any parent will appreciate how difficult it can be to not lose patience, especially with young children who overflow with energy and often lack self-control.

CONCLUSION

The Prophet Muhammad has had more written about him than any other human being in history, yet no amount of words can do justice to his outstanding character. Thanks to the preservation of the Qur'an and Prophetic tradition, humanity has access to a comprehen-

hensive, divinely ordained way of life with a practical example to follow in order to perfect their worship of God: “***The Messenger of God is an excellent model for those of you who put your hope in God and the Last Day and remember Him often.***” [33:21]

In the next chapter, we will see how this transformative quality of the Qur'an was not limited to just the Prophet Muhammad, but his companions also embodied these values which revolutionised not only Arabia for the better but ultimately the entire world: “***And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds.***” [21:107]



Impact on society

Before the coming of Islam, the world was in a state of oppression and injustice. Pre-Islamic Arabia was a dreadful place to live in. The Arabs were an immoral people. Slavery was an economic institution. Male and female slaves were bought and sold like animals. They were the most depressed class of the Arabian society. Illiteracy was common among the Arabs, as were alcoholism and adultery. Those with power and money took advantage of the poor by charging 100 percent interest on loans. Arabia was a male-dominated society. Men could marry any number of women. When a man died, his son “inherited” all his wives except his own mother. Women had virtually no legal status. They had no right to possess property and had little to no inheritance rights. Female infanticide was widely practiced: daughters were often buried alive. Blood feuds were regular occurrences between tribes and often lasted generations; for example, when one tribe killed a camel belonging to another it led to the start of a terrible war which lasted for 40 years, killing scores of people from both sides [98]. I think you can appreciate why this period of Arab history before the dawn of Islam is known as the period of ignorance!

Can you imagine being tasked with reforming such a society? Have a think about how long it would take one person to cure all these social ills. A lifetime? Perhaps several generations? You may even view it as an impossible task. Just to give you an idea of the scale of the challenge, let us look at an attempt in recent Western history to eradicate just one of these social ills: alcoholism. In 1920, the United States

government passed a nationwide law to ban the sale, production, importation, and transportation of alcoholic beverages for moral and medical reasons. This era is commonly known as the Prohibition. Although the consumption of alcohol fell at the beginning of the Prohibition, it subsequently increased and led to other problems such as corruption and organised crime. The law was repealed in 1933. The failure of one of the most powerful governments in the world to tackle just a single social ill should make us reflect on the Qur'an. The Qur'an managed to completely reform not only alcoholism but all the social ills of Arabian society in a single generation. It took just 23 years! This was a revolution the likes of which the world has never witnessed.

Now, perhaps you might be thinking to yourself, these social ills of Arabia were a result of the tribal nature of society and the harsh desert environment the Arabs dwelt in. But the fact is that even the superpowers of the world at the time, the Byzantine and Persian Empires, were unjust and oppressive societies. Pope Gregory I, head of the Catholic Church and a contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad, said:

What is there now, I ask, of delight in this world? Everywhere we observe strife; fields are depopulated, the land has returned to solitude...And yet the blows of Divine justice have no end, because among the blows those guilty of evil acts are not corrected [99]

Pope Gregory was referring to the oppression and tyranny he was facing at the hands of the Germanic Lombards. He was bemoaning the pitiful condition of his world, the city of Rome. The Pope was not alone in his grief. Almost every society in the world was experiencing some oppression and injustice. Syrian Orthodox Christians were witnessing heavy persecution due to their differences with the ruling Byzantine Church. The Egyptian Coptic Church was also under the persecution of the Byzantines. Jews were on the brink of extinction at the hands of the Catholic Church in Spain.

It was against this backdrop that the Qur'an was revealed, transforming not only Arabia, but also the rest of world. One of the reasons for the revelation of the Qur'an was to bring mankind out of this corrupt state. The Qur'an proclaimed loud and clear:

[This is] a Book which We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], that you might bring mankind out of darknesses into the light by permission of their Lord - to the path of the Exalted in Might, the Praiseworthy. [14:1]

Peace and justice was not only delivered to the Arabs, but the whole world reaped the fruits of this blessing from God. As we will see, the peace and justice emanating from the Islamic system produced some of the most civilised societies in the history of mankind.

HOW THE QUR'AN BROUGHT JUSTICE TO THE WORLD

Just how did the Qur'an and early Muslims go about reforming society? This is the testimony of Ja'far bin Abi Talib, who was a contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad. Here he informed the king of Abyssinia about the condition of his people and the positive change Islam had brought for them:

O King, we were an uncivilised people, worshipping idols, eating corpses, committing abominations, breaking natural ties, treating guests badly, and our strong devoured our weak. Thus, we were until God sent us an apostle whose lineage, truth, trustworthiness, and clemency we know. He summoned us to acknowledge God's unity and to worship Him and to renounce the stones and images which we and our fathers formerly worshipped. He commanded us to speak the truth, be faithful to our engagements, mindful of the ties of kinship and kindly hospitality, and to refrain from crimes and bloodshed. He forbade

us to commit abominations and to speak lies, and to devour the property of orphans, to vilify chaste women. He commanded us to worship God alone and not associate anything with Him, and he gave us orders about prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. We confessed his truth and believed in him, and we followed him in what he had brought from God, and we worshipped God without associating aught with Him. [100]

The people of Arabia were transformed within a few decades and they became the torch bearers of a new civilisation in the world, a civilisation that would change the course of human history forever. The Prophet Muhammad and his followers liberated not only their own people from tyranny but helped to free their neighbours. The Qur'an stipulated that Muslims must help the oppressed, regardless of whom, and where, they are:

And what is [the matter] with you that you fight not in the cause of God and [for] the oppressed among men, women, and children who say, "Our Lord, take us out of this city of oppressive people and appoint for us from Yourself a protector and appoint for us from Yourself a helper?" [4:75]

The Muslims were thus, charged to help the oppressed people of the world. History testifies to the fact that the early Muslims rescued the populations of Syria, Egypt and Spain from a reign of tyranny:

i. Syria rescued from Byzantine Empire.

Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, in the reign of the second Caliph, Umar bin Khattab, the Muslim armies began liberating the people of Syria from the Byzantines (Romans). The Christians of Syria were divided into many different denominations, such as Monophysites, Jacobites and Nestorians. Almost all of them

were facing severe persecution at the hands of the ruling Byzantine Church. Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, a Jacobite patriarch from 818 to 845 CE, stated in his chronicle that the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius sent an army to expel the Muslims out of Syria and recapture the land. The Muslim forces decided to withdraw from Syrian cities in order to fight an open pitch battle with the Byzantines. Whilst pulling back, the Muslims decided, out of fairness, to refund the money which they had taken as a tribute from the Syrian Christians:

Abu Ubaydah, whom Umar had put in command of the Arabs, ordered Habib bin Maslama to return to the Emesenes the tribute which he had exacted from them with this message: “We are both bound by our mutual oaths. Now we are going to do battle with the Romans. If we return, this tribute is ours; but if we are defeated and do not return, we are absolved of our oaths”. [101]

This was an unprecedented demonstration of honesty and justice. The non-Muslims paid a poll tax to the Islamic state so that their lives, religion and property were protected under the rule of the Muslims. However, in this case the Muslims knew that they might be unable to protect the Christians of Syria due to an imminent attack by Heraclius. Therefore, it was not fair to keep the money if they could not protect the masses. Also, one must note that this was taking place in seventh century Syria where plunder, robbery and injustice were a common occurrence. The Syrians were shocked by the Muslims' merciful conduct. Another point worth mentioning is that this incident is narrated by a ninth century Christian source, which testifies that the Muslims did not abuse power and they did not betray the trust that the Christians had bestowed upon them. Why did the Muslims return such big sums to the Christians? Why did they not keep this wealth when they needed it the most, as they were facing a much larger army than themselves? The response to all these perplexing questions is that these Muslims obeyed God and followed His injunctions in the Qur'an:

God commands you [people] to return things entrusted to you to their rightful owners, and, if you judge between people, to do so with justice: God's instructions to you are excellent, for He hears and sees everything. [4:58]

The Christians of Syria preferred the Muslim rule over the oppressive Byzantines, as the Muslims had brought justice and good governance. Moreover, after the Muslims defeated the Byzantine army and returned to Syria, they were welcomed back as heroes. Dionysius confirms this:

So the Arabs left Damascus and pitched camp by the river Yarmuk. As the Romans marched towards the Arab camp every city and village on their way which had surrendered to the Arabs shouted threats at them. As for crimes the Romans committed on their passage, they are unspeakable, and their unseemliness ought not even to be brought to mind...The Arabs returned, elated with their great victory, to Damascus; and the Damascenes greeted them outside the city and welcomed them joyfully in, and all treaties and assurances were reaffirmed.

[102]

One cannot imagine the conquered welcoming the conqueror “joyfully”. Yet it happened in Syria once upon a time.

ii. Egypt saved from Byzantine persecution.

Like Syria, Egypt was also governed by the Byzantines. The ruling Byzantine Church was utterly opposed to doctrinal dissent. The Egyptians were mostly Jacobite Christians and did not agree with the Byzantine version of Christianity. The result of this disagreement was heavy persecution at the hands of the ruling elite. The eminent British orientalist and historian Thomas Arnold summarised the situation as follows:

The Jacobites, who formed the majority of the Christian population, had been very roughly handled by the Orthodox adherents of the court and subjected to indignities that have not been forgotten by their children even to the present day. Some were tortured and then thrown into the sea; many followed their Patriarch into exile to escape from the hands of their persecutors, while a large number disguised their real opinions under a pretended acceptance of the Council of Chalcedon. [103]

The Muslims were greeted as liberators when they arrived in Egypt, led by Amr ibn al-As, a contemporary and close companion of the Prophet Muhammad. Even the Egyptian Coptic Christians supported their intervention. John of Nikiu (690 CE), a Coptic bishop in Nikiu (Egypt), asserted that one of the reasons for the Muslim success in Egypt was the hatred of the masses for the Byzantines and that the Egyptians not only refused to fight the Muslims, they actually supported the conquest: ***"When Muslims saw the weakness of the Romans and the hostility of the people to the emperor Heraclius... they became bolder and stronger in the war...And people began to help the Muslims."*** [104]

It should be noted that these are contemporary Christian sources testifying that the Muslims were actually supported by the Egyptian Coptic Christians against the Byzantine Christians. If the Byzantines had treated the masses justly, then would the Coptic population of Egypt not have fought alongside the Byzantines against the Muslims? It was the tolerant attitude of the Muslims and the barbarity of the Byzantines which facilitated the rapid downfall of the Byzantines in the land of the Pharaohs.

If the oppression and injustice exhibited by the Byzantines was the norm for ruling powers, then why did the Muslims not act in the same way? As with all matters in life, Muslims are bound to act according to the code of conduct laid out in the Qur'an, and war is no exception. If Muslims happen to be at war, then, even when they

might be facing severe opposition, they must be righteous. They are prohibited from extreme action: “***Fight in God’s cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits: God does not love those who overstep the limits.***” [2:190]

For example, Muslims are not allowed to harm innocent men, women and children. This can be seen in the instructions given to the Muslim army by their leader Abu Bakr, the first successor of the Prophet Muhammad:

I advise you ten things: Do not kill women or children or an aged, infirm person. Do not cut down fruit-bearing trees. Do not destroy an inhabited place. Do not slaughter sheep or camels except for food. Do not burn bees and do not scatter them. Do not steal from the booty, and do not be cowardly. [105]

The Qur'an also instructs Muslims with regard to those non-Muslims who do not fight them: “***God does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with anyone who has not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes: God loves the just.***” [60:8]

Muslims are not supposed to fight anyone who desires peace and co-existence. Alfred J. Butler, whose work on the Arab Conquest of Egypt is to this day an authoritative reference point, studied the relevant chronicles and made many profound statements pertaining to the Islamic leadership's tolerance and protection of the Christian population in Egypt:

After all that the Copts had suffered at the hands of the Romans and the Patriarch Cyrus, it would not have been unnatural if they had desired to retaliate upon the Melkites [the Romans]. But any such design, if they cherished it, was sternly discountenanced by 'Amr, [the Muslim conqueror of Egypt] whose government was wisely tolerant but perfectly impartial between

the two forms of religion. Many facts might be cited in proof of this contention...two forms of Christianity must be imagined as subsisting side by side under the equal protection of the conquerors. [106]

This is exactly what had occurred in Syria as we saw in the previous section. The Syrians preferred the rule of the Muslims, just as the Egyptians did. It was the justice of Islam that appealed to both populations. Moreover, the Copts not only welcomed the Muslims, they facilitated the conquest by joining the ranks of the conquerors.

iii. Spain liberated from tyranny.

Muslims landed in Spain in 711 CE. Many sources testify that they were welcomed by the population, as their reputation preceded them. This was, again, due to the severe persecution certain communities were facing. Under the Catholic Church's rule, the Jewish community, in particular, was severely oppressed. The Catholic hierarchy in Spain held many councils to solve political and religious disputes. In these councils, severe edicts were issued against the Jews of Spain. One of the clauses in the text of the proceedings of the Fourth Council of Toledo (633 CE) states:

We decree that the sons and daughters of the Jews should be separated from the company of their parents in order that they should not become further entangled in their deviation, and entrusted either to monasteries or to Christian, God fearing men and women, in order that they should learn from their way of life to venerate the faith and, educated on better things, progress in their morals as well as their faith. [107]

Hence, the children of the Jews were to be forcefully converted to Catholicism. Jews were not the only ones facing tyranny but they were easy targets: they were a minority with a different way of life distinct from their Christian persecutors. So, when the Muslims

arrived, Jews were the first people to greet them as saviours. Zion Zohar, a Jewish American historian, confirms the appreciation that Jews felt for the Muslim arrival: “***Thus, when Muslims crossed the straits of Gibraltar from North Africa in 711 CE and invaded the Iberian Peninsula, Jews welcomed them as liberators from Christian Persecution.***” [108]

This was the beginning of the Golden Age as far as the Jews were concerned. The behaviour of the Muslims in Spain was no different to their conduct in Syria and Egypt. They facilitated freedom of religion for all people regardless of any differences. This was a long awaited opportunity for the Jews to flourish and make progress. Prior to the Muslim arrival, the Jews could not imagine having religious freedom. They were facing extinction at the hands of the Catholic Church. Zion Zohar summarised the benefits Jews reaped from the Muslim protection as follows:

Born during this era of Islamic rule, the famous Golden Age of Spanish Jewry (circa 900-1200) produced such luminaries as: statesman and diplomat Hasdai ibn Shaprut, vizier and army commander Shmuel ha-Nagid, poet-philosophers Solomon Ibn Gabriol and Judah Halevi, and at the apex of them all, Moses Ben Maimon, also known among the Spaniards as Maimonides. [109]

Heinrich Graetz, a nineteenth century Jewish historian, expressed similar sentiments regarding Islamic rule:

It was in these favourable circumstances that the Spanish Jews came under the rule of Mahometans [Muslims], as whose allies they esteemed themselves the equals of their co-religionists in Babylonia and Persia. They were kindly treated, obtained religious liberty, of which they had so long been deprived, were permitted to exercise jurisdiction over their

co-religionists, and were only obliged, like the conquered Christians, to pay poll tax... [110]

Thus, the Islamic rule proved to be one of the best things in the history of Judaism. The Spanish Jews reached such a high level of learning and progress that they could now claim to be world leaders of Judaism. The Jews were certainly saved from extinction by the Muslim conquest of Spain. Moreover, for the first time, the three Abrahamic faiths were able to co-exist alongside one another in peace and harmony. Maria Rosa Menocal, one of the authorities on medieval European literature, authored the book *Ornament of the World* to pay her respect to the peaceful co-existence between three Abrahamic faiths in medieval Spain. Sadly, the ornament of medieval Spain was destroyed after the departure of the Muslims, as Spanish historian Ulick Burke puts it painfully:

The institutions that had flourished under the Moslem, died when the Moslem departed; and after four centuries of light and learning, Andalusia fell back, under the Christian rule, into a condition of ignorance and barbarism, nearly, if not quite, equal to that of the north western provinces of the peninsula. [111]

This culminated with the Spanish Expulsion of 1492, an edict issued by Catholic Monarchs of Spain ordering the expulsion of Jews from the lands. This was not uncommon as between the 13th and 16th centuries European countries expelled the Jews from their territory on at least 15 occasions.

It is abundantly clear from the evidence seen above that the Muslim conquest of Spain initiated one of the brightest periods in the history of man. The darkness of oppression and injustice reigned over Spain prior to the Muslim arrival. It was the mercy of Islam that liberated the Jewish population. The Muslims' behaviour was not accidental; the previous examples of Syria and Egypt serve to demonstrate the consistency of their conduct in different lands, in different times. Thus, the laws of the Qur'an are a form of God's

mercy, which is shown to Muslim and non-Muslim alike, when they are implemented as intended by God, in accordance with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad: ***“And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds.”*** [21:107]

THE CONSEQUENCES OF JUSTICE, TOLERANCE AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE

Much of Western philosophy and science finds its basis in the thoughts and teachings of the ancient Greek philosophers. In the 6th century BCE, the ancient Greeks broke away from a mythological approach to understanding the world, and initiated an approach based on reason and evidence - what is today called “rational thinking”. It is defined largely by three great thinkers: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. In c.387 BCE, Plato founded the Academy in Athens, the first institution of higher learning in the Western world, which helped to lay the foundations of Western philosophy and science. The Academy endured for nearly 1,000 years as a beacon of higher learning. It was closed by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian in 529 CE in an effort by the Catholic Church to suppress the heresy of pagan thought. The Greek ancient chronicler John Malalas recorded: ***“During the consulship of Decius [529 CE], the Emperor issued a decree and sent it to Athens ordering that no one should teach philosophy nor interpret the laws.”*** [112]

Following the closure of the Greek schools of philosophy, Europe entered into a 1,000 year period of intellectual slumber. Thus, the “lights went out” on rational thinking and Europe entered the Dark Ages. Indeed, Europe’s creative energies and inventiveness are acknowledged much later, only from the dawn of the “scientific revolution” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A good example that is characteristic of this era is that of the astronomer Galileo. In 1610, he published a work which promoted heliocentrism, the idea that the Earth and planets revolve around a relatively stationary Sun at the centre of the Solar System. Today, science has confirmed that this model of the universe is correct; however, at that time it conflicted with the prevailing theological belief of geocentrism. Due to its literal interpretation of the Bible, the Catholic

Church held that the Earth was the centre of the universe and that all heavenly bodies revolved around the Earth. Galileo's discoveries were met with opposition within the Catholic Church, and in 1616 the Church formally declared heliocentrism to be heretical. Heliocentric books were banned and Galileo was ordered to refrain from holding, teaching or defending heliocentric ideas. Later, the Church found him "gravely suspect of heresy", sentencing him to indefinite imprisonment. Galileo was kept under house arrest until his death in 1642.

There is a stark contrast between this intellectual slumber of Europe and activity in the Islamic world. The coming of the Qur'an in the seventh century not only transformed Arabia but also the lands that were under the control of the Muslims. The peace and sense of security that Islamic rule brought about consequently produced one of the most successful civilisations in the history of the world. While Europe was in the Dark Ages, it was the Muslims that produced some of the best known scholars. Victor Robinson, a historian of science, eloquently summed up the contrast between medieval Europe and Islamic Spain:

Europe was darkened at sunset, Cordova shone with public lamps; Europe was dirty, Cordova built a thousand baths; Europe was covered with vermin, Cordova changed its undergarments daily; Europe lay in mud, Cordova's streets were paved; Europe's palaces had smoke-holes in the ceiling, Cordova's arabesques were exquisite; Europe's nobility could not sign its name, Cordova's children went to school; Europe's monks could not read the baptismal service, Cordova's teachers created a library of Alexandrian dimensions. [113]

Some examples of Muslim advances in science are the mathematician al-Khwarizmi, who played a significant role in the development of algebra. He also came up with the concept of algorithms which is why he is called the grandfather of computer science. The physi-

cian Az-Zahrawi is considered the greatest medieval surgeon and is described by many as the father of modern surgery. He made pioneering discoveries in surgical procedures and instruments; for example, the material he utilised for internal stitching is still used in surgery today. The astronomer Al-Sufi made the earliest recorded observation of the Andromeda Galaxy. This was the first galaxy other than the Milky Way to be observed from Earth. The philosopher Ibn Sina is considered one of the greatest thinkers and scholars in history. He provided the first descriptions of bacterial and viral organisms. He also discovered the contagious nature of infectious diseases and introduced the concept of quarantine to limit the spread of disease. He has been so influential in medicine that he is referred to as the father of modern medicine [114].

You may be surprised to learn that many of the scientific words and terms we use today are taken from the Arabic language; this is a legacy of the discoveries of Muslim scientists. For example, the word “algebra” comes from the Arabic word “al-jabr”, taken from the title of one of the books by the Muslim mathematician al-Khwarizmi. The word “algorithm” is taken from al-Khwarizmi’s name itself. The word “alchemy” comes almost unchanged from the Arabic “al-kimya”. One of the greatest contributions made by Arab scholars was their development of the science of astronomy. If you look at a modern star chart, you will find hundreds of stars whose names derive from Arabic: Altair, Aldebaran, Betelgeuse, Vega, Rigel and Algol, to name a few. Finally, we owe the decimal number system that we use for counting to Arab mathematicians. In fact, the most common symbolic representation of numbers in the world today (1, 2, 3 etc.) are actually taken from Arabic numerals.

You may be wondering, what is it about the Qur'an that inspired Muslims to go from the depths of ignorance of the pre-Islamic era to being leaders of the world in the sciences? Many of these scientists were excellent Islamic theologians and it was the Qur'an which drew their attention to inquire into the natural world and showed them the path to knowledge and enlightenment:

Read! In the name of your Lord who created: He created man from a clinging form. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by [means of] the pen, who taught man what he did not know. [96:1-5]

These verses make up the first passage revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. It is interesting that of all the things which God could have begun His revelation with, the actions of reading and writing were chosen. Notice how the very first word revealed was a commandment to “read”. Thus, the Qur'an attaches great importance to knowledge and education.

It is God who brought you out of your mothers' wombs knowing nothing, and gave you hearing and sight and minds, so that you might be thankful. [16:78]

God created man and provided him with the tools for acquiring knowledge, namely hearing, sight and minds. Thus, the Qur'an reminds us that we should be grateful to God for these tools which give us the means to obtain knowledge.

How can those who know be equal to those who do not know? Only those who have understanding will take heed. [39:9]

Here, the Qur'an highlights the noble status of the one who has knowledge; they are superior to those who lack knowledge, as one who is knowledgeable has greater understanding. This encourages Muslims to continually seek knowledge.

Then do they not look at the camels - how they are created? And at the sky - how it is raised? And at the mountains - how they are erected? And at the earth - how it is spread out? [88:17-20]

The Qur'an draws our attention to many natural phenomena by encouraging us to observe the world around us.

There truly are signs in the creation of the heavens and earth, and in the alternation of night and day, for those with understanding, who remember God standing, sitting, and lying down, who reflect on the creation of the heavens and earth... [3:190-191]

Moreover, this observation of the world around us should not be aimless but rather we should ponder and reflect on what we see.

If you have doubts about the revelation We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a single chapter like it- enlist whatever witnesses you have other than God- if you truly [think you can]. [2:23]

The concept of putting ideas to the test is encouraged by the Qur'an, as is the use of witnesses in order to validate conclusions. It must be noted that no other religious text challenges its reader in such ways. The use of falsification tests is unique to the Qur'an.

Let us summarise these concepts that the Qur'an puts forward with regards to knowledge: using our senses to observe the world around us, thinking and reflecting on what we observe, putting ideas to the test, and providing witnesses to validate our conclusions. If these concepts seem familiar to you it is because they resemble the modern scientific method. Modern students of science understand that everything must be proven. You cannot make claims about scientific theories based on assumption without experimentation. The scientific method is the process by which science is carried out. It involves observing a natural phenomenon, making a hypothesis based on the observations and verifying the hypothesis by carrying out experiments. If the hypothesis turns out to be correct then it becomes a theory (a proven hypothesis). If it is not correct then further observation will be performed, the original hypothesis will

be updated and the whole process will repeat itself. For example, a fun anecdote we are taught in school is that an apple fell onto the head of the scientist Sir Isaac Newton when he was sitting under a tree. Based on this observation, he then came up with the hypothesis that there must be some force or attraction that makes the apple fall to the ground. He tested his hypothesis and this is how he devised the law of gravity.

Now, whether or not an apple really did fall onto Sir Isaac Newton's head is not important. What matters is that it is the scientific method which allowed him to validate his ideas about how gravity works. Now you can appreciate why this experimental approach to science is perhaps one of the greatest ideas ever conceived of. It is the basis of all scientific progress and without it we would not have devised laws of physics such as gravity. It is theories such as this that have allowed mankind to create the automobile, computer and travel into space.

You may be wondering, who came up with such an important idea? Before Islam, the ancient Greek philosophies of science were predominant in Western civilisation. The Greeks believed that knowledge should be advanced through deduction, which means that you rely on reason alone without taking evidence into consideration. The development of a scientific process resembling the modern method was developed by the 10th century Muslim scholar Ibn al-Haytham. He is regarded as the father of the scientific method and was the first scientist in history to insist that everything be proven through induction, which uses observations and experimentation to challenge previously held theories. His process involved the following stages:

1. Observation of the natural world.
2. Stating a definite problem.
3. Formulating a robust hypothesis.
4. Test the hypothesis through experimentation.

5. Analyse the results.
6. Interpret the data and draw conclusions.
7. Publish the findings.

Ibn al-Haytham first studied theology, the Qur'an, and he stated that it was the Qur'an that inspired him to study philosophy and science:

"I decided to discover what it is that brings us closer to God, what pleases Him most, and what makes us submissive to His ineluctable Will." [115]

Using his revolutionary scientific method, Ibn al-Haytham made leaps and bounds in the field of optics. In his book, *The Book of Optics*, he was the first to disprove the ancient Greek idea that light comes out of the eye, bounces off objects, and comes back to the eye. He delved further into the way the eye itself works. Using dissections, he was able to begin to explain how light enters the eye, is focused and is projected to the back of the eye.

The translation of *The Book of Optics* had a huge impact on Europe. From it, later European scholars were able to understand the way light works and devices such as eyeglasses, magnifying lenses, telescopes and cameras were developed. Without Ibn al-Haytham's scientific method, we may still be living in a time when speculation, superstition, and unproven myths are the basis of science. It is not a stretch to say that without his ideas, the modern world of science that we know today would not exist.

THE ORIGINS OF THE EUROPEAN ENLIGHTENMENT AND RENAISSANCE

In the thirteenth century, the seeds of Muslim learning began to germinate in Europe. Thus, Europe awoke from the Dark Ages and entered a new era of enlightenment known as the Renaissance. Translations of Arabic works on science were made for almost three centuries, starting from the tenth to the thirteenth century and gradually spread throughout Europe. Professor George Saliba penned a

book on this very topic and stated that:

There is hardly a book on Islamic civilization, or on the general history of science, that does not at least pretend to recognize the importance of the Islamic scientific tradition and the role this tradition played in the development of human civilisation in general. [116]

Professor Thomas Arnold was of the opinion that the European Renaissance originated in Islamic Spain:

Muslim Spain had written one of the brightest pages in the history of Medieval Europe. Her influence had passed through Provence into the other countries of Europe, bringing into birth a new poetry and a new culture, and it was from here that Christian scholars received what of Greek philosophy and science they had to stimulate their mental activity up to the time of the Renaissance. [117]

The classical Greek works referenced in the above quote were lost to Europe during its Dark Ages. It was Muslim scholars who rescued these works by translating and preserving them in the Arabic language. They subsequently found their way back into Europe when they were translated from Arabic into Latin. Moreover, Muslims did not just preserve them; they built upon them by studying the ancient Greek works in detail. They carried out experiments, wrote commentaries on them and corrected the theories where necessary in the form of their own independent works. A few such examples are Al-Biruni's criticism and correction of Aristotle's philosophy in a work called *Questions and Answers*; Al-Khwarizmi's correction of Ptolemy's geography in his work *Face of the Earth*; Ibn al-Haytham's correction and refutation of Galen's optics based upon practical experiments; Al-Khazini's work on measures of weights and densities surpassed his Greek predecessors [118].

In fact, Europe took far more from the Muslim world than this book can do justice. Among other things: windmills, soap, perfume, sugar, irrigation, spices, universities, street lights, the paper industry, mass literacy, freedom of thought, architecture, poetry, hygiene, libraries and ceramics. New Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3...) in particular revolutionised the mathematics of Medieval Europe and consequently had a lasting effect on architecture. Cathedrals, castles, palaces, gardens and many more structures were built in medieval Europe by the help of Islamic Spain's architectural techniques.

Finally, let us perform a thought experiment: if the Qur'an had never been revealed, then what would the likely state of the world be today? Let us think this through step by step. From the Qur'an emerged the justice of Islamic law; from that justice came peace and co-existence; with that peaceful co-existence came free intellectual activity in Muslim lands and from this freedom of literacy originate the knowledge that took Europe out of the Dark Ages and ushered in the Renaissance. Thus, is it not reasonable to conclude that the modern world, with all of its advanced technology like the internet and mobile phones, is a direct consequence of the revelation of the Qur'an? [119]



Reflections on the signs of the Qur'an

No one wants to dedicate their entire lives to a particular religion, philosophy or way of life only to find out when we die that we were wrong. We only get one shot, we have only been given one life, and so the stakes are very high. The only way that we may find the truth about God, or anything for that matter, is to approach it objectively. Other religions tell you to believe and not to think or question. The Qur'an is unique because it tells us that we must think and question so that we can reason our way to the truth. The Qur'an constantly encourages its reader to think and reflect: “***Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'an, or are there locks upon [their] hearts?***” [47:24]. Revelation can only benefit us if we reflect upon it, and the fact that God endowed every one of us with the ability to reason is evidence that He does not want us to be blind followers. The Qur'an in fact, admonishes those who follow blindly: “***Indeed, the worst of living creatures in the sight of God are the deaf and dumb who do not use reason.***” [8:22]

If we reason about the nature of revelation, then what qualities would you expect to find in a book from God? Would you not expect it to transcend human works? If the work of God could not be distinguished from human works, then how could we be expected to distinguish truth from falsehood and identify God's guidance?

The Qur'an is full of signs that it is the truth of God: “***We shall show them Our signs in every region of the earth and in themselves, until it becomes clear to them that this is the Truth...***” [41:53]. Let us reflect on the different aspects of the Qur'an that we have looked at: its concept of God, preservation, timeless relevancy, literary features, structure, accurate future prophecy, revealing lost knowledge from history, the fact that it cannot be imitated and its impact on society. When a work excels in just one of these areas, they are rightly hailed as a masterpiece and revered across generations. What should we make of the Qur'an, a book that has achieved the inhuman feat of excelling in every area that it touches upon?

Muslims do not just believe that the Qur'an is from God based on blind faith. The Qur'an is a living miracle, one that we can all experience for ourselves just by opening it up and reading it. As we have seen, the Qur'an challenges its reader and engages our intellect by providing many testable and verifiable proofs of its divine origin.

Moreover, we should think about the purpose of these different aspects of the Qur'an. Are they present for the sake of our entertainment, or is there a grander and more meaningful purpose behind them? Each verse of the Qur'an is intended as a sign for mankind. Instead of viewing these different signs that we have focused on as isolated, unrelated wonders, we should look at their accumulated effect. We should peer up to admire the sheer scale of this tower of evidence. This is a compass that points us to the heavens, and that is exactly what the Qur'an is – a guide for mankind: “***This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God...***” [2:2]



Who authored the Qur'an?

There is no doubt that the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was the person responsible for transmitting the Qur'an. There are mass historical reports that support this claim, and the Qur'an itself confirms that it was revealed to him:

But He will overlook the bad deeds of those who have faith, do good deeds, and believe in what has been sent down to Muhammad - the truth from their Lord - and He will put them into a good state. [47:2]

Although Muhammad was responsible for its transmission, in the light of all the amazing facts we have analysed about the Qur'an, could he have been its author? For the sake of argument, if the author were not God, but a human being, then what would be some of the characteristic human traits you would expect to find? People tend to project their own personalities into their works, which you can think of as mirrors of their authors. Human beings are also fallible. Our works are not perfect. We also like praise and recognition, so we naturally try to hide our shortcomings and highlight our achievements.

Since Muhammad was a human being, if he were the author of the Qur'an, then would it not be reasonable to expect to find at least some of these traits in the Qur'an? We are now going to look at some reasons why it is impossible for any person, especially Muhammad, to have been its author:

1. Muhammad's lifelong reputation of being truthful.

Throughout his life, Muhammad had a reputation for being honest, so much so that he earned the titles of “The Trustworthy” and “The Truthful”. This was the case for 40 years of his life, long before his Prophethood. His family, friends, neighbours and business acquaintances knew that he was the most honest and truthful person among them.

This is demonstrated in an incident that took place before he publicly announced his Prophethood. One day, Muhammad climbed to the top of a hill and called out to all the tribes of his city. They quickly gathered around him and he asked them, **“O Quraish! If I say that an army is advancing on you from behind the mountains, will you believe me?” All said in one voice, “Yes; because we have never heard you telling a lie”** [120]. All the people of his city, without any exception, bore witness to his life-long truthfulness and honesty, for he had lived a pure and pious life among them for 40 years.

Even after publicly announcing his Prophethood, when many of his people turned against him and the message of the Qur'an, he still retained a reputation of being trustworthy and truthful. Such was their trust in his noble character that even though they had turned into his enemies, opposed the Qur'an and persecuted him and his companions, they still entrusted him with their valuables for safekeeping.

There is an incident that took place when he had to flee his home city by nightfall, because of a plot by his enemies to murder him whilst he slept. Whilst he was making plans to escape, he still had in his possession the valuables belonging to the people plotting to murder him. Since he was leaving behind his house and furniture, to take their valuables in place of his own would have been seen as the smallest of compensations. But such was his honest character that before his departure, the Prophet asked his cousin, Ali, to stay behind to ensure every article in his house was given back to its rightful owner.

Liars and conmen typically display certain behaviour and share a common psychological profile: they have a reputation for lying that starts out with small lies which gradually get bigger and bigger. Does it make sense that Muhammad, a person who had never told a lie, neither big nor small, during his entire life would start lying by inventing the biggest lie of all, that he had been chosen by God to be His Prophet and receive the Qur'an? How could Muhammad tell lies about God, when he did not tell lies about human beings? His conduct shows his steadfast honesty even in the most difficult times!

2. Muhammad's personal speech does not match the Qur'an.

If the Qur'an was a product of the mind of Muhammad, then would you not expect its style to be similar to his personal speech? Recently, linguistic research has been conducted to compare the style of speech found in the Qur'an with thousands of statements made by Muhammad, a Prophetic tradition known as Hadith, as memorised by his companions and recorded in the books of Hadith. Sahih Al-Bukhari was the book used to compare against the Qur'an. This book happens to be the most authentic collection of thousands of Muhammad's sayings in existence. Studies were performed and all the results of this investigation from a linguistic perspective have shown that the two works must have different authors. Some of the results that form the basis of this conclusion include [121]:

- Words composed of a single letter are much more frequently used in the Qur'an than in the Hadith.
- The Qur'an contains approximately twice the number of words with nine and ten letters than the Hadith. This fact shows that the Qur'anic vocabulary contains longer words than the Hadith, words longer than eight letters.
- Most importantly, 62 percent of the words from the Hadith are not found in the Qur'an and 83 percent of the Qur'an's words are not found in the Hadith. This conclusion of differing vocabulary is also reinforced by the above mentioned results.

If the Qur'an was a product of Muhammad's mind, then how is it possible that he maintained two distinct styles of speech over a period of 23 years, without ever combining the styles? Remember that many verses of the Qur'an were revealed instantaneously in response to unexpected events, so there was no opportunity to take time and carefully plan what was being said in order to maintain the different styles. This is surely a psychological and physiological impossibility.

Moreover, Muhammad experienced many trials and tribulations during the course of his Prophetic mission. For example, his children died, his beloved wife Khadija passed away, he was boycotted, and his close companions were tortured and killed. These emotions come through in the Hadith. You find some instances of sadness and anger in his personal statements due to the extreme situations he faced. However, the Qur'an consistently remains Divine in voice and character [122]. It would be a psychological and physiological impossibility for a human to undergo the suffering the Prophet did, without any of this human emotion being expressed in the Qur'an.

3. The portrayal of Muhammad.

The position of some sceptics is that Muhammad was power hungry. They believe his claims of divine inspiration were nothing more than an attempt to conquer Arabia.

Now, for the sake of argument, if Muhammad was the author of the Qur'an, and his agenda was to obtain power and dominate Arabia, then one would expect the Qur'an to portray him as infallible and not to highlight any of his shortcomings. Is that not why politicians, actors and most famous people have public relations and marketing teams to maintain their positive public image? Yet the Qur'an does not perform this function. Here is just one example: "***He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him – for all you know, he might have grown in spirit, or taken note of something useful to him.***" [80:1-4] These verses highlight an incident where Muhammad was once sitting with some tribal leaders, inviting them to become Muslim. A blind Muslim man came to ask him some questions regarding Islam. Muhammad

turned away from him, as he was busy delivering the message of Islam to the tribal leaders, hoping their tribes would embrace Islam. Thereupon, the revelation came reproaching him for his treatment of the blind man. Does the author of the Qur'an sound like an image-driven, power hungry man?

4. Other Prophets are mentioned more times than Muhammad.

The Qur'an mentions other Prophets, such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus, peace be upon them all, more times by name than Muhammad. The Qur'an commands Muslims to hold all of them in equally high regard:

So [you believers], say, 'We believe in God and in what was sent down to us and what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and what was given to Moses, Jesus, and all the prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we devote ourselves to Him.' [2:136]

Human beings are naturally egocentric, so if Muhammad were the author then should we not expect the Qur'an to focus on him to the exclusion of the other Prophets? Not only are all these other Prophets mentioned more times by name than Muhammad, but the Qur'an even gives them a better status than they have in their own respective scriptures, the Torah and Gospels.

5. The Qur'an went against the customs and norms of society.

The tribal society at the time of the Prophet Muhammad gave little care or regard to those who were in positions of weakness in society, particularly women. The doctrine laid out in the Qur'an considerably improved the status of women in 7th century Arabia. For example, it was the custom for unwanted baby girls to be buried alive. This practice was prohibited in the Qur'an:

When one of them is given news of the birth of a baby girl, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. In his shame he hides himself away from his people because of the bad news he has been given. Should he keep her and suffer contempt or bury her in the dust? How ill they judge! [16:58-59]

In those days before Islam, women were treated like slaves or property. Their personal consent concerning anything related to their well-being was considered unimportant, to such a degree that they were never even treated as a party to a marriage contract. Women had been treated as possessions of their husbands. Again the Qur'an served to put an end to this: "**You who believe, it is not lawful for you to inherit women against their will..." [4:19]**

Before Islam, women had no independence, could not own property and were not allowed to inherit. Again the Qur'an guaranteed women a fair share of property: "**Men shall have a share in what their parents and closest relatives leave, and women shall have a share in what their parents and closest relatives leave, whether the legacy be small or large: this is ordained by God." [4:7]**

Even in comparison to the Secular West, Islam was way ahead of its time. From the point of view of economic rights, you may be surprised to learn that up until the 19th century in Europe, women did not have the right to own property. When they were married, the property would transfer to the husband or she would not be able to dispense of it without the permission of her husband. In Britain, perhaps the first Western country to give women some property rights, laws were passed in the year 1870 known as "Married Women Property Act." More than 1,000 years earlier, that right was clearly established in Islamic law.

Even from a spiritual point of view, women were uplifted by Islam because the Qur'an tells us that believing men and women are rewarded by God equally, for similar actions:

For men and women who are devoted to God—believing men and women, obedient men and women, truthful men and women, steadfast men and women, humble men and women, charitable men and women, fasting men and women, chaste men and women, men and women who remember God often – God has prepared forgiveness and a rich reward. [33:35]

For the sake of comparison, at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, the Church was still holding council meetings to debate whether or not women even have souls!

Had Muhammad been the author of the Qur'an, he would have had absolutely nothing to gain by uplifting the status and rights of women in tribal Arabia. Quite the opposite in fact, as the stance of the Qur'an only served to alienate and create enemies of those who were in positions of power over women and had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

6. Rejection of the superstitions of the Arabs.

Arab society held many superstitious beliefs at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. This was only natural given that they lacked the technology to examine the world around them and had high rates of illiteracy. It is estimated that the number of literate persons in the region of Western Saudi Arabia, the locality of Muhammad, did not exceed seventeen [123]. History has recorded a large number of myths and superstitions pertaining to the Arabs, such as the belief that certain months of the year brought bad luck [124]. There is a notable incident recorded that on the same day that the infant son of the Prophet Muhammad died, there was an eclipse of the sun and moon. The people linked the two events together by saying that even the sun and moon were saddened by the death of his child. The Prophet Muhammad personally denounced such beliefs, saying: "***The sun and the moon do not eclipse because of the death or life (i.e. birth) of someone..." [I25]***

Is there really any reason why the Prophet Muhammad would go against the superstitions of his people, especially when he came from a tribal culture that blindly followed the traditions of their forefathers? Had Muhammad been an imposter, then this would have been the perfect opportunity to take advantage of the ignorance of the people, but he did not.

Moreover, it was against this backdrop of superstition and myth that the Qur'an was revealed. The Qur'an also records some of the superstitions of the Arabs, such as their worship of the sun and the moon: ***The night, the day, the sun, the moon, are only a few of His signs. Do not bow down in worship to the sun or the moon, but bow down to God who created them, if it is truly Him that you worship.*** [41:37]

Not only does the Qur'an utterly reject such beliefs, but as we have seen in an earlier chapter, it also contains a deep insight into areas of science such as astronomy and embryology. These concepts are presented in such a way that they make sense to the 7th century Arab and also to us living in the 21st century. They are in perfect harmony with modern scientific discoveries. How could Muhammad, unable to read or write, and living in a society that lacked the technology to understand the world around him, have authored such a book?

7. Muhammad did not boast about the Qur'an.

We have a very detailed account of the life of Muhammad, more so than any other human being in history, including the smallest of details such as how he slept, ate and even how he used to smile so much that you could see his premolar teeth. Yet none of his companions or enemies ever recorded him boasting about the many amazing aspects of the Qur'an that we have covered in this book. Now, for the sake of argument, if a human being were able to craft a work of the magnitude of the Qur'an with all of these amazing aspects – such as its relevancy, literary features and structure – then would we not expect them to boast about it? In a land filled with poets, where poetry was highly valued, even just one of these aspects taken by itself would rightfully be worthy of praise. As such an

achievement would have been the perfect claim to fame, why did Muhammad not boast about it? Many of these aspects were only discovered by scholars of the Qur'an centuries later and more are still being discovered to this very day.

8. Abundance of falsification tests.

For the sake of argument, were Muhammad the author of the Qur'an, with his sole mission and purpose in life being to accumulate as much power as possible throughout Arabia, then why does the Qur'an contain an abundance of falsification tests, such that were any one of them to be achieved or proven true by his enemies and sceptics, then it would have completely destroyed Islam as a religion? Here are just a few examples:

"Do they not consider the Qur'an (with care)? Had it been from other than God, they would surely have found there-in many contradictions." [4:82]

Say, 'Even if all mankind and jinn [spirits] came together to produce something like this Qur'an, they could not produce anything like it, however, much they helped each other.' [17:88]

Only God, having knowledge of the future, and an insight into the capabilities and limitations of human beings, can make such bold statements that stand the test of time.

9. Knowledge of the unseen from the past.

As we saw in a previous chapter, the Qur'an demonstrates an accurate insight into lost history. For example, advances in our understanding of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs have shown that the Qur'anic use of the Egyptian term 'Pharaoh' is historically accurate. This is in spite of the fact that all knowledge of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs was unknown at the time of the Qur'anic Revelation. The Qur'an also reveals information about the idolatry of Abraham's people, knowledge that had been buried beneath desert sands for thousands of years until archaeological excavations in the

20th century. Muhammad could not have been the author of the Qur'an because its author consistently demonstrates knowledge of the unseen, of different times and places in history – a divine, not a human, trait: "***That is from the news of the unseen which We reveal to you, [O Muhammad]. You knew it not, neither you nor your people before this***" [11:49]

10. Predictions about the future.

As we saw earlier, the Qur'an contains clear prophecies about the future that have either already come true or are transpiring before our eyes today. Purely from a probability point of view, is it possible to accurately guess future events, spanning multiple nations and different time periods, and many of which were outside of the sphere of influence of Muslims, without making a single mistake? This is strong evidence that the author of the Qur'an has knowledge of the unseen.

Let us take the preservation of the Qur'an as an example. History has not always dealt kindly with Scriptures. In fact, prior to the Qur'an, every other revealed Scripture has either been lost or tampered with. It is in this backdrop that the author of the Qur'an makes a bold prediction about its preservation: "***We have sent down the Qur'an Ourselves, and We Ourselves will guard it.***" [15:9]

If the Prophet Muhammad were the author of the Qur'an, then he could not have guaranteed that it would be perfectly preserved to this very day, especially in the light of the many social and political changes that the Muslim world has undergone in more than 1,400 years since the Qur'an was first revealed. The track record of all other revealed Scriptures throughout history proves that the opposite is the case, when faced with similar social and political changes that the Qur'an has endured, their loss and tampering in such circumstances was the norm. The Qur'an is the unique exception to this rule!

11. The Qur'an does not conform to human desires.

There is a controversial incident that took place during the lifetime of Muhammad. In order to sow discord in the Muslim community, some people started slandering Muhammad's beloved wife by accusing her of sexual immorality. For one whole month this continued. Even some Muslims started to doubt her innocence. During this time, Muhammad and his family suffered great anxiety, and perhaps worst of all, the enemies of Islam revelled in the situation, using it to their advantage to create tension in the Muslim community. This was because of the tribal nature of their society. If the honour of his wife was being questioned then by Muhammad's association with her, his honour was also being undermined.

If Muhammad were the author of the Qur'an, could he not have invented some new verses straight away in order to declare the innocence of his wife and put an end to the rumours? But he did not. He had to wait patiently for a whole month for the revelation to come down to him. There is wisdom behind God making the Muslims wait for the revelation. It exposed the hypocrites who, until then, were pretending to be believers and living amongst the Muslims. These are the verses that announced his wife's innocence:

When you heard the lie, why did believing men and women not think well of their own people and declare, 'This is obviously a lie'? And why did the accusers not bring four witnesses to it? If they cannot produce such witnesses, they are the liars in God's eyes. [24:12-13]

This shows that what was revealed of the Qur'an was not based on his own desires but rather it was revelation from God. The Qur'an clearly warns Muhammad against tampering with the Qur'an: "***If [the Prophet] had attributed some fabrication to Us, We would certainly have seized his right hand and cut off his lifeblood, and none of you could have defended him.***" **[69:44-47]**

12. The Qur'an cannot be imitated.

Perhaps the greatest miracle of the Qur'an is that it cannot be imitated. The author of the Qur'an tells us that it is impossible for anyone to produce just one chapter like it, even if we were to all help one another in the effort: "**Say, 'Even if all mankind and jinn [spirits] came together to produce something like this Qur'an, they could not produce anything like it, however, much they helped each other.'**" [17:88]

The Arabs at the time considered themselves (and are still considered by historians and linguists to this day) to be masters of the Arabic language. The failure of those at the peak of their trade – mastery of the Arabic language – to rival the Qur'an which challenged them should make one think about its origins. We can break down who could have possibly authored the Qur'an into groups of people to better analyse its origins. Let us explore each of these options: the Prophet Muhammad, another Arab or a non-Arab:

Prophet Muhammad?

In addition to the earlier points in this chapter that we covered, which show he could not have been the author, to this we can add that he could not read or write. The Qur'an itself confirms this: "***Follow the Messenger— the unlettered prophet they find described in the Torah that is with them, and in the Gospel...***" [7:157]

Moreover, he was not a poet, nor was he considered a master of the language. He did not engage in the craft of poetry. Therefore, to claim that he somehow managed to create a literary and linguistic masterpiece is irrational. Navid Kermani, an expert in Islamic studies, writes:

He had not studied the difficult craft of poetry, when he started reciting verses [of the Qur'an] publicly... Yet Muhammad's recitations differed from poetry and from the rhyming prose of the soothsayers, the other conventional form of inspired, metrical speech at the time. [126]

The scholar Taqi Usmani similarly argues:

Such a proclamation was no ordinary thing. It came from a person who had never learned anything from the renowned poets and scholars of the time, had never recited even a single piece of poetry in their poetic congregations, had never attended the company of soothsayers. And far from composing any poetry himself, he did not even remember the verses of other poets. [127]

We know from history that at a personal level the Prophet Muhammad disliked poetry and there are instances where he attempted to relate some poetry and would jumble the words up:

Aisha was asked: “Did the Prophet, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him, used to relate anything from poetry?” She said: It was most detestable thing to him except that (at times) he used to relate a verse from the person of Banu Qays and he jumbled it up. Abu Bakr told him it was not like that. So the Prophet of God said, “By God I am not a poet and neither is it appropriate for me.” [128]

How could the Prophet Muhammad, unable to read or write and without any training or reputation for being a poet or linguist, have authored the Qur'an, the most important work in the whole of Arabic literature?

There might be some who would go to the extremes of claiming that Muhammad was such a genius that he was able to come up with the Qur'an in spite of his lack of poetic and linguistic training. However, such a claim is groundless: we know that all literary masterpieces written by geniuses have undergone revision and deletion to ensure literary perfection. An example to highlight this point is the work

of the highly acclaimed poet Al-Mutanabbi. He was considered to be the greatest of all Arab poets and an unparalleled genius. Yet he would correct his work and produce various editions until he was satisfied with his poetry [129]. Contrastingly the Qur'an was revealed instantaneously and remained unchanged. Its verses were at many times revealed for specific circumstances and events that occurred during the period of revelation. Each verse was revealed without revision or deletion, yet were compiled together to create the Qur'an, a literary masterpiece of unsurpassed excellence. In this light, the explanation that it is a result of Muhammad's genius is not plausible.

Another argument that dismisses the assertion that the Qur'an was a consequence of the Prophet Muhammad's genius, concerns the existence of blueprints for human expressions, and the tools required to replicate them. All types of human expression – whether the result of a genius or not – can be imitated if the blueprint of that expression exists, given that the tools are available for us to use. This has been shown to be true for various human expressions, such as art, literature and even complex technology. But in the case of the Qur'an we have its blueprint – the Qur'an itself – and the tools at our disposal – the classical Arabic language. Yet no one has been able to imitate its eloquence and unique literary form. To elaborate on this further, consider the general consensus that Shakespeare is a literary genius. The English playwright may have been a genius but his work is available as a blueprint for others to try and imitate. Since the blueprint of his work is available, it is not surprising that the English Dramatist Christopher Marlowe has a similar style, and that Shakespeare has been compared to Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher and other playwrights of his time [130].

An Arab?

There are a few key reasons why the Qur'an could not have come from an Arab other than Muhammad. Firstly, the Arabs of Muhammad's time achieved unrivalled linguistic and literary mastery yet they failed to challenge the Qur'an and the leading experts of the time testified to the inimitable features of the Qur'an. One of the best linguists of the time, Walid Ibn al-Mughira, exclaimed:

And what can I say? For I swear by God, there is none amongst you who knows poetry as well as I do, nor can any compete with me in composition or rhetoric – not even in the poetry of jinns! And yet, I swear by God, Muhammad's speech [meaning the Qur'an] does not bear any similarity to anything I know, and I swear by God, the speech that he says is very sweet, and is adorned with beauty and charm. [131]

If the Qur'an could be imitated, any poet or linguist could have come out and produced something better or at least similar to it. The expert in Islamic studies Navid Kermani makes this point clear, "**Obviously, the Prophet succeeded in this conflict with the poets, otherwise Islam would not have spread like wildfire.**" [132]

What about today's Arab? Firstly, the Arabs in the 7th century were better placed to challenge the Qur'an because of their mastery of the language, and since they failed to do so, it would be unreasonable to assert that a modern Arab could surpass the abilities of their predecessors. This is because modern Arabic has lost the purity of classical Arabic due to the borrowing of foreign words. So how can an Arab, who is a product of a linguistically degenerated culture, be equal to an Arab who was immersed in an environment of linguistic purity? Secondly, even if a modern Arab learns classical Arabic, their linguistic abilities could not match someone who was born and raised in a culture that mastered the language.

A Non-Arab?

The Qur'an could not have come from a non-Arab as the language of the Qur'an is Arabic. The knowledge of the Arabic language is a requirement to successfully challenge the Qur'an. What if a non-Arab learns the language? This would make that person an Arabic speaker and we have already seen that an Arab could not have authored the Qur'an. Also, there are differences between native and non-native speakers of languages as various academic studies have concluded. For example, differences exist between English speakers with just one non-native parent and those with two native parents. The speakers with one non-native parent would exhibit poorer linguistic performance in certain tasks than those with native parents [133]. Research conducted by Professors Kenneth Hyltenstam and Niclas Abrahamsson concluded that there are subtle differences even between competent non-native speakers and native speakers [134]. In conclusion, to assert that the Qur'an, a book that defines the peak of eloquence in the Arabic language could be a product of a non-Arab, or non-native speaker, is absurd.

The Qur'an gives the answer.

As we have seen, the Prophet Muhammad was not a trained poet, nor did he have any inclination towards poetry. To say that he was a genius who did not need any poetic training or any revisions, additions or improvements for the Qu'ran of any kind is unheard of, especially considering it has not been matched to this day in terms of its eloquence and unique literary form. In addition to this are the numerous other points that we have covered in this chapter, such as his outstanding honesty, his personal speech differing from the Qur'an and the like. It seems clear that the Qur'an could not have come from the Prophet Muhammad, or any other human being for that matter. The best explanation as to who authored the Qur'an lies within the Qur'an itself: "***This Scripture is sent down from God the Mighty, the Wise. It is We who sent down the Scripture to you [Prophet] with the Truth...***" [39:1-2]



Some final thoughts

During the course of this book, we have covered many incredible aspects of the Qur'an. Yet what we have seen only represents the tip of the iceberg. There is so much to the Qur'an that no other book can do it justice. Whatever is said or written about the Qur'an will always fall short in describing and exploring its words and their meanings: "**Say [Prophet], 'If the whole ocean were ink for writing the words of my Lord, it would run dry before those words were exhausted' – even if We were to add another ocean to it.'**" [18:109]

The Qur'an is a miracle which, without doubt, has to have come from God Almighty. It is taken by Muslims as an evidence for God's existence, because only He could author such a work. Since the Qur'an is God's message to mankind, then it stands to reason that Muhammad is God's Messenger, since he was the one given the message.

While this book has covered many intellectual reasons to believe in the Qur'an, is there more to it than that? What is it about the message of the Qur'an that makes it resonate with over 1.5 billion Muslims today, nearly a quarter of humanity, people of all races, nationalities and backgrounds? The Qur'an tells us that God created man with a natural disposition: "**So [Prophet] as a man of pure faith, stand firm and true in your devotion to the religion. This is the natural disposition God instilled in mankind...**" [30:30]

This means that all people are born in a natural state of submission to the Creator. It is the child's parents, friends and society that might take them away from this natural state. Our Creator revealed the Qur'an, a book which is in tune with the innate disposition of mankind, to guide us back to this natural state. The word "Islam" means attaining peace by submitting to our Creator, and a Muslim is one who practices Islam.

At the heart of the Qur'an is a very simple but profound message: there is nothing worthy of worship except Almighty God, and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is His Messenger. This is the core belief of every Muslim. Islam is not a passive way of life. If we truly love God then this should manifest itself in our actions. One of the most important actions that a Muslim performs is the daily prayers. It is not that God needs this. God is without needs and is entirely self-sufficient. Rather, we have been created with that need as a means of attaining peace: "***Truly it is in the remembrance of God that hearts find peace.***" [13:28]

Have a think about the biggest achievements you have accomplished in life. At the time of writing this book, I would say that I am able to summarise my life's biggest achievements in a few sentences. Have a think about your own life. Is it not frightening how an entire lifetime can be reduced to a few words when we strip out the mundane things we do like sleeping and eating? Sleep alone consumes a third of our lives. The point I am making is that life is short and soon, very soon, we will all die, but death is not the end. The Qur'an teaches that there is a Day of Judgment when God will assemble us together and we will have to answer for everything that we have done. Those who were good and lived a life of obedience to God will live forever in complete joy and bliss in Paradise. There will be no hatred or anger or jealousy, just peace and happiness, physical and spiritual. What a beautiful abode! That, really, is what the Creator is inviting us to: Paradise.

Guidance is from God alone, but the sincerity to acknowledge and worship Him comes from our own free will. I invite you to submit to your Creator by embracing Islam. In order to become a Muslim and enter the fold of Islam, one has to simply confess in their heart and utter with their tongue the following declaration of faith:

I am a witness that there is nothing worthy of worship except Almighty God, and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is His Messenger (or in Arabic: “Ash shadu an laa il laaha il Allah wa ash hadu anna Muhammada rasul lu lah”).

You can get support as a new Muslim by contacting
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May God’s peace, blessings and guidance be upon you.



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